

climate change on the ballot

How Environmental and Social Justice Activists Beat Back California's Proposition 23

This case study is published as part of the Democracy Center's series of Climate Campaign Profiles. These studies have been produced to gather lessons from climate activism in diverse places and contexts in order to share these with other campaigners and help build the effectiveness of their advocacy work. You can find the full series in the Climate & Democracy section of our website.

By Jim Shultz

The struggle to win political action on the global climate crisis takes place on many different battlefields. Sometimes the objective is to pressure lawmakers. Sometimes activists need to take aim at global corporations or institutions. In 2010 in California, climate and environmental activists found themselves drawn into a fight on one of the most difficult political battlefields of all – an election involving more than 17 million voters. The political battle over Proposition 23, an attempt by two Texas oil companies to destroy California's climate law, is the story of how citizens joined together to fight and to win the day in this complex world of ballot politics in one of the largest electorates in the world. It is a story with urgent and valuable lessons, not just for climate battles on the ballot, but climate battles everywhere.

the story

In 2006, with national action on climate change stalled by gridlock and corporate politics in Washington, environmental groups and lawmakers in California took bold action on their own. California's legislature and governor approved [AB 32 \(also known as The California Global Warming Solutions Act\)](#), a sweeping new law to curb the carbon emissions of the most populous state in the nation. The law set a target of cutting California's carbon emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, and empowered state regulators to mandate stricter fuel emission standards for cars and energy efficiency requirements for appliances, to take action against major sources of industrial carbon emissions, and to strengthen forest protection.

The law went well beyond anything being considered in Congress and had significant implications both practically and politically well beyond the state's borders. As the seventh largest economy in the world and 19th largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, carbon reductions in California would be a meaningful step forward to carbon reduction globally. Moreover, by setting a political example as it has in so many issues,

California's new law was poised to help advance national momentum for action as well.¹

In early 2010 a pair of Texas gas and oil companies, Valero Energy Resources and Tesoro, began a political effort to kill the law in its infancy. They financed a \$2 million signature-gathering campaign to qualify a state ballot measure, Proposition 23, which would have effectively dismantled the new climate law. 'The California Jobs Initiative,' as Proposition 23 was originally titled by its backers, aimed to use the state's sour economy and soaring unemployment rate (approaching 12%, and among the highest in the nation) as a hook to win voter 'suspension' of AB 32. The measure's backers, which also included [the right-wing billionaire Koch brothers](#), claimed that Proposition 23 merely suspended the law temporarily until the state's unemployment rate fell to less than 5.5% for a full year – an economic feat not seen since the 1960s. Over the course of the campaign Valero and Tesoro together would contribute more than \$7 million to the campaign to pass Proposition 23 and companies run by the Koch brothers another \$1 million.²

The campaign to pass Proposition 23 began with a powerful set of political winds pushing in

¹ *It should be noted that many environmental justice organizations in the state objected to the use of "cap and trade" regulations as part of AB 32's implementation, based on concerns that the approach lets major polluters off the hook in terms of making real reductions in carbon emissions. So as those groups were organizing to help defend the overall law from political attack, they were also suing the state in court to drop "cap and trade."*

² *These and all other campaign finance figures cited here come from the California Secretary of State's campaign finance data base at: <http://cal-access.sos.ca.gov/Campaign/>*

its favor. The U.S. was headed into one of the largest conservative electoral tidal waves in a generation. Economic fears seemed to trump all other concerns, particularly environmental concerns. Initial polling showed state voters basically tied on the measure and Valero and Tesoro, two companies with deep pockets and a lot at stake, seemed ready to spend an avalanche of campaign cash to push Proposition 23 to passage. But on Election Day on November 2, the voters of California not only rejected the initiative, they did so by nearly two to one – 61.6% No, 38.4% Yes. It was a historic defeat by one of the widest margins suffered by any recent ballot measure.

That victory, a landmark in the political battles over the climate crisis, was a product of many ingredients – smart strategy, diverse alliance building, energized grassroots mobilization, disciplined messaging, and a few lucky breaks including a Texas vs. California match-up in the baseball World Series. It is a victory

that offers powerful and important lessons for climate politics, the value of which go far beyond California.



Proposition 23 opponents took advantage of the Texas vs. San Francisco World Series that took place on the eve of the November 2010 vote. Photo: Conservation Strategy Group

the strategy

Ballot measure politics in California is a high stakes enterprise, impacting the public policies of one of the largest democracies on the planet. By necessity it involves a level of strategic discipline often missing in other kinds of advocacy politics. There is no such thing as “coming close” – you either win or you lose and you know exactly which just a few hours after the balloting is over. Campaigns that are serious have a clear strategy and a clear plan to implement that strategy. The citizen campaign against Proposition 23 had both and executed all its efforts both intelligently and powerfully.

Outreach Strategy:

A Tale of Two Audiences, and Two Campaigns

Ballot campaigns, be they for candidates or ballot measures, are based on three essential questions: Who are the voters we need to reach?; What do we need to say to them?; How should we say it? Everything a campaign does from the start is based on reaching and moving those audiences. The answers about how to do that are not left to conjecture or theory; some science is applied through the finer arts of polling and public opinion research. Through polling, ballot campaigns aim to categorize voters into three groups: those who will be against you no matter what you do (whom you ignore), those who are already strongly with you (who you aim to register to vote and cajole to the polls on Election Day), and a third group that becomes the centerpiece of the campaign for both sides – swing voters. These are the undecideds, the people who could go either way on the issue. Wooing them to your side is at the heart of election strategy, for candidates and ballot measures alike.

The early polling commissioned by the “NO on 23” campaign made it clear that on Proposition 23 there were two key audiences of swing voters – two very different groups of Californians. On one side is what might be called, ‘the white independents,’ particularly political moderates and women under fifty. The second was the state’s booming population of Latinos, Asian Pacific Islanders, and African Americans. These two distinct groups of undecideds, who together constituted more than a third of the likely electorate, would be the campaign battlefield.

For more than two decades, the holy grail of progressive ballot politics in California has been to craft an appeal that works simultaneously to both these blocks of voters at the same time. It is, however, a very hard task to undertake. Each is moved by different messages and each must be approached in very different ways. A string of ballot campaigns in California have been rife with tension between the two, with activists in ethnic minority communities almost always feeling shunted aside by the efforts aimed at appealing to swing voter moderates.³ Leaders in those ethnic communities had also borne witness to the ways in which corporations with deep financial pockets had been able to bombard their communities with misleading messages on issues ranging from oil taxes to health regulations. On Proposition 23, environmental

³ One classic example was the 1994 campaign aimed at defeating Proposition 187, an anti-immigrant initiative, in which Democratic Party operatives basically asked immigrant groups to be publicly invisible in order to not provoke moderate voters. Immigrant groups did not oblige, staging a mass march in Los Angeles. For more on this tension see, “The Initiative Cookbook: Recipes and Stories from California’s Ballot Wars,” The Democracy Center, 1996, <http://democracyctr.org/publications/books/the-initiative-cookbook/>

justice organizations in California’s Latino, Asian and African-American communities decided that it was time to form a campaign of their own.

The ‘NO on 23’ effort became a march of two separate campaign operations, but with close links and amiable coordination. The state’s big mainstream environmental groups – led by the [Environmental Defense Fund](#) (EDF), the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) (NRDC), and the [California League of Conservation Voters](#) (CLCV) – formed the Stop Dirty Energy committee. With the help of both grassroots and wealthy donors the committee raised more than \$25 million for a campaign focused primarily at moderate swing voters. The [Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#) (APEN), [Communities for a Better Environment](#) (CBE) and other organizations active in Latino, Asian and African-American communities formed [Communities United Against the Dirty Energy Proposition](#) and raised \$1.4 million to support a grassroots education and mobilization campaign in those communities.

Messaging Strategy: Climate Change Takes a Backseat

Ballot campaigns are a contest between two competing narratives aimed at the same voters. A strategic campaign tests the best arguments available to both sides. The ‘NO on 23’ effort’s early polling showed that the measure’s backers – their opposition - had three strong arguments that played very well among the persuadables:⁴

- At a time when state unemployment is already soaring, California’s global warming law will cost us more than a million jobs as a result of added state energy regulations.

4 The summaries of the ‘NO on 23’ campaign’s polling comes courtesy of the campaigns polling firm, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates in Oakland, California.

- The state’s climate law is really just a \$60 million hidden “energy tax” that will increase the cost of gasoline at the pump for everyone.

- On top of its extreme economic costs, the new climate law also hands enormous new powers to unelected bureaucrats who will be able to act without any voter approval.

“We knew early on that if the fight was between the economy vs. the climate, people would vote for economics,” said EDF’s Wade Crowfoot who served on the Stop Dirty Energy steering committee.⁵ Protecting aggressive state action on climate may have been a central motivator for many of those leading the charge against Proposition 23, but it was not the argument that would win over voters. ‘NO on 23’ polling laid out three arguments that could:

- Proposition 23 will eliminate clean air and anti-pollution rules, making the air our children breathe dirtier.
- Proposition 23 will jeopardize more than half a million clean energy jobs in California just when we need new employment the most.
- Proposition 23 is a move by a pair of Texas oil companies to deceive California voters.

Instead of waging a campaign led by the call for action on global climate, the environmental and environmental justice groups waged a battle about local clean air, children’s health, green jobs, and marauding out-of-state oil companies. These messages also bridged the gap between the two wildly different voter audiences that the ‘NO on 23’ campaigners needed to reach. The cause of clean air appealed not only to politically

5 From an interview with the author, San Francisco, January 2011.

moderate suburban women but also urban ethnic minorities who live near some of the dirtiest factories and energy plants in the state. “Health and jobs, this is how we were talking about the issue already,” said APEN’s executive director Roger Kim, a major figure in the Communities United effort. “It’s about the air you are breathing in your neighborhood. People know that the environment is linked to their everyday lives.”

These two dueling narratives went to battle with one another over the course of nearly half a year – in [television advertisements](#), voter mailings, the [official state ballot pamphlet](#), newspaper editorials, door-to-door visits by activists, and all the other communication mechanisms of modern politics. As the campaign moved forward, it became more and more clear that Valero, Tesoro, and the Koch brothers did not have the winning argument.

The icing on the NO side’s campaign messaging cake came just a week before the election when, by pure luck, the two teams that batted their way into the World Series were the Texas Rangers and the San Francisco Giants. Baseball fans, including a good portion of the campaign’s target audiences, were riveted to the Texas vs. California battle on the field and ‘NO on 23’ campaigners made ample use of the symbolism off the field. The campaign ran ads in newspapers using the Giants team colors and the image of a player from behind, under the banner, “Beat Texas. NO on Prop. 23.” When San Francisco won the series over the Rangers on November 1, the day before the election, the timing could not have been better.

Ally Strategy: From Caesar Chavez’ Closest Ally to Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of State

In a ballot campaign aimed at an electorate as diverse as California’s, building a broad alliance is critical. The opponents of Proposition 23 managed to weave together one of the most diverse array of allies ever brought to bear on a California initiative. Those alliances were key to three main elements of the campaign – money, messaging, and mobilization.

With their eye on the moderate undecideds and on the large sums that the campaign would need to finance television advertising and other activities, the Stop Dirty Energy committee led by the big environmental groups focused their early alliance building on the business community and environmentally-inclined Republicans. The groups enlisted two key deep-pocket allies early, San Francisco hedge fund manager [Tom Steyer](#) and Silicon Valley venture capitalist [John Doerr](#). Steyer gave a total of \$5 million to the ‘NO on 23’ effort. Doerr and his wife Ann contributed \$4 million. Both also helped tap into the pockets of their wealthy business associates as well.

Access to Republicans came via [Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), who had been a chief sponsor of the state’s threatened climate law. The governor and his wife, Maria Shriver, won the support of one of “NO on 23”s most important voices, Republican [George Shultz](#) who served as President Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of State. Shultz’s wife, Charlotte Mailliard Shultz, served as the state’s official Chief of Protocol (advising on state social functions). The former Reagan cabinet member joined Steyer as a co-chair of Stop Dirty Energy, recorded a television advertisement against the measure, and spoke passionately about it in a series of [news interviews](#).

At the same time, Communities United was doing deep alliance building in the state's ethnic communities, targeting ten counties in particular that were home to more than 75% of California voters of color.⁶ While some of that work was aimed at delivering some big names that would hold sway with ethnic voters (Dolores Huerta, co-founder with Caesar Chavez of the United Farmworkers Union, played a key role with Latino voters), the real focus was to build alliances of community organizers who could actually hit the streets.

By the time the campaign was over the 'NO on 23' coalition included more than one thousand public health, labor, environmental, business, and social justice organizations. They ranged from small local groups to well-known state-wide organizations including AARP, the California chapters of the American Lung Association and American Cancer Society, and the California Labor Federation.

Action Strategy:

From the Airwaves to the Streets

With a clear sense of its target audiences and a set of honed and tested messages, the real work of the 'NO on 23' effort was one common to all advocacy efforts – take action to get that message delivered. The organizations engaged in the campaign against the initiative did this in many different ways all at once.

⁶ This and other details of the inside workings of the Communities United campaign come from two sources: a 2011 Power Point presentation, "NO on 23" prepared by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network and the Ella Baker Center, and *A Perfect Storm: Lessons from the Defeat of Proposition 23*, an excellent in-depth case study by Catherine Lerza for the Funders Network on Transforming the Global Economy, http://www.fntg.org/documents/Prop23CaseStudy_000.pdf

Battles Over Ballot Language

The one piece of information that every voter is certain to see about a ballot measure is its formal 'title and summary.' It appears on official voter information, in the polling booth on Election Day, and it is used widely by the media to explain what the proposed law would do. Because of its importance, 'NO on 23' campaigners actively sought to label the measure in the most negative way possible. They also had a key ally. The state Attorney General, Jerry Brown, who bore legal responsibility to draft the ballot description, was an opponent of the initiative and also a candidate for Governor, and sympathetic to the legal arguments made by environmentalists.

Hopes by Valero and Tesoro to go to the ballot with 'The California Jobs Initiative' were quickly dashed with [an official description](#) that read: "Suspends implementation of air pollution control law (AB 32) requiring major sources of emissions to report and reduce greenhouse emissions that cause global warming, until unemployment drops to 5.5 percent or less for full year." With its focus on 'air pollution control' the language directly resonated with the language used by the 'NO on 23' campaign, an important victory.

Paid Advertising

In a state with more than 17 million registered voters to reach, the primary means of communication is advertising, especially on television. The Stop Dirty Energy committee spent more than \$14 million on advertising, the vast majority of it on television spots. The campaign produced and ran 14 different ads, including one in Spanish, and ran them in every media market in the state. All of the ads were designed to reinforce the three basic messages that had polled so well with swing voters – the [power play by](#)

[Texas oil companies](#), the impact on air pollution, and the [dismantling of ‘green jobs’](#).



Green jobs was a key rallying point for No on 23 campaigners. Photo: BlueGreen Alliance

[One television ad](#) juxtaposed the images of belching oil refineries and people carrying solar panels, warning: “Prop 23 is one deceptive ballot measure from two Texas oil companies that would have three disastrous consequences: 23 would pollute our air, kill clean energy jobs, and keep us addicted to costly oil.” A similar version used the image of a “Proposition 23 Dirty Energy” bumper sticker pulled back to reveal that it was on the back of a Tesoro gas truck.⁷

The [American Lung Association of California](#), the organization opposing the initiative that polled highest in terms of credibility with voters, was featured prominently in the ‘NO on 23’ advertising. With images of oil refineries and a child with an inhaler on the screen, Jane Warner, the [president of the group’s California chapter](#) declared: *“Our mission at the American Lung Association is to protect public health and the air we breathe. That’s why we’re strongly opposed to Proposition 23. Prop 23 is backed by two Texas oil com-*

⁷ The texts and images of the ‘NO on 23’ ads come courtesy of a list of scripts furnished by Joseph Caves and Leslie Friedman of the Conservation Strategy Group.

panies that are among the worst polluters in California. They designed 23 to repeal portions of our health and safety code which would result in more air pollution and more cases of asthma and lung disease.” A similar spot featured the head of the [California Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics](#). Health concerns and a doctor were also at the center of the ‘NO on 23’ ad in Spanish.

[A spot featuring former Reagan Secretary of State George Shultz](#) boasted the bipartisan opposition to Proposition 23, with Shultz saying on screen: “‘NO on 23’ transcends party divisions and is important to all of Californians, and for that matter, the United States and the world.” Another ad just juxtaposed a long list of ‘NO on 23’ endorsers, including both the Democratic and Republican candidates for governor, against the words “Two Texas Oil Companies.” Another ad raised fears of costs to consumers: “23 could increase energy costs for California families by up to six hundred and fifty dollars per year.”



Former Reagan Secretary of State George Shultz, a senior Republican, in a television ad opposing Proposition 23. Source: YouTube

The Communities United campaign, with a vastly smaller budget, focused its advertising on radio - a medium that is both far less expensive and allows ads to be carefully targeted to specific communities and produced in specif-

ic languages. As Catherine Lerza reports in her excellent case study of the Communities United effort, [A Perfect Storm, Lessons from the Defeat of Proposition 23](#), “Communities United purchased \$200,000 worth of radio time in every major media market in the state.” The ads included spots in Spanish with L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Dolores Huerta.

In addition to these TV and radio spots, the Stop Dirty Energy committee also sent out 3.5 million direct mail advertisements to voters and paid to be on 31 campaign ‘slate advertisements’ (shared door hangers and other ads with other campaigns) amounting to another 34 million separate pieces of direct voter communication. The campaign also used extensive social media outreach to spread its message, garnering more than 20,000 fans to its Facebook page, more than 1.2 million views of its campaign Tweets, 11 million views of its on-line videos, and more than 140 million clicks on its Facebook advertisements.

‘Earned’ Media

In the linguistics of political campaigning, ‘earned media’ refers to news and other coverage you don’t pay for in cash. It is the coverage you get from an array of activities that range from press conferences to protests. The ‘NO on 23’ effort engaged in all these activities and more, helping to make the initiative by far the most visible on the ballot, drawing attention not just in California but nationally and globally as well.

The Stop Dirty Energy effort promoted by the big environmental groups and wealthy donors held 23 news conferences during the course of the campaign, published 40 op.ed. articles in newspapers, 30 letters to the editor, and 300 blog posts. Communities United’s ‘earned media’

effort included outreach to the wide array of ethnic community newspaper and media outlets across the state. The group also included less conventional media efforts aimed at drawing the attention of California’s newer and younger voters. A ‘NO on 23’ caravan to college campuses around the state featuring popular hip hop artists produced both a wave of public attention and a [‘NO on 23’ hip hop video](#) that drew thousands of viewers.

The result of all this activity by both wings of the ‘NO on 23’ campaign was more than 1,600 news articles about the campaign (most echoing the themes being raised by the NO effort), 47 news editorials calling for a NO vote, and a powerful level of visibility that aided all other aspects of the campaign.

Direct Voter Outreach

These various forms of paid and earned media created a political atmosphere around Proposition 23 that defined it the way its opponents needed it to be defined. In the state’s ethnic minority communities, however, that advertising atmosphere had to be matched with the kind of direct voter contact that you can’t engineer in a production studio.

The core organizations that had formed Communities United – [Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#), [Communities for a Better Environment](#), [California Environmental Justice Alliance](#), [Ella Baker Center for Human Rights](#), [Greenlining Institute](#), Power Pack and other environmental justice groups – already had a strong base of activists, networks and community goodwill on which to build. In the ‘NO on 23’ campaign they turned that into something new, a disciplined, statewide campaign operation. Their audience was clear – voters in the Latino, Asian

and African-American communities in ten target counties – and their strategy was clear as well. The first step was to reach those voters directly, in their language of choice and by leaders and groups they trusted. The second was to make the connection for those voters between Proposition 23 and the threat it posed to their local environmental concerns.



Latino activists around the state rallied against Proposition 23. Photo: BlueGreen Alliance

In the final six weeks of the campaign, on a budget of \$1.4 million, the Communities United effort reached 250,000 voters with an active door-to-door and telephone field operation. The organizers brought two of the oldest forms of election campaigning squarely into the center of 21st century election campaigning. One key was being able to approach immigrant voters in Mandarin, Spanish and other languages besides English. “The majority of Chinese voters are foreign born and prefer to speak their native language,” said Roger Kim of APEN.⁸ The ‘NO on 23’ campaigners found immigrant voters hungry to talk about both the initiative and the elections in general, delighted to be given a chance to

have a real conversation about the issues in the language they best understood. Communities United also delivered direct mail pieces against Proposition 23 to more than 280,000 households in English, Spanish and Chinese.

Kim called environmental concerns “a hugely motivating issue for communities of color.” In very strategic and direct ways Communities United reached out to some of the campaign’s most key undecided voting blocks and made the connection for them between the issues they cared about and the confusing measure on their November ballot.

Other Campaign Actions

The campaign against Proposition 23 drew in all kinds of activists and all kinds of activism, including people whose political work was oriented much more to the street than the ballot box. So a challenge facing the campaign was how to incorporate this brand of action into the campaign in a way that would be strategic and avoid an unhelpful backlash.

Some activists saw the ‘NO on 23’ effort as a chance to raise the issue of corporate power and to use the two Texas oil companies as a target. In several cities around the state activists staged protests at Valero gas stations, a convenient and visible stand-in for the corporation leading the assault on California’s climate law. Those early protests helped frame the initiative as a battle against out-of-state oil companies. Some activists, however, wanted to go farther still. “We had activists who wanted to do boycotts against the gas stations as well,” noted Leslie Friedman-Johnson of the [Conservation Strategy Group](#),

⁸ From an interview with the author, Oakland, CA, August 2011.

who played a leading role in assembling the ‘NO on 23’ coalition.⁹

The boycott idea presented two potential problems for the campaign. One is how difficult and time consuming it is to actually pull off a successful business boycott and the other was that many of Valero’s gas stations are independently owned as small businesses and targeting their owners might have provoked a political backlash. Instead the more street-oriented activists directed their energies into efforts such as Days of Action, rallies in a dozen communities across the state that drew out thousands of people and help energize the activist base around the NO campaign.

Playing Politics with the Opposition

In election politics you not only pay careful attention to what you do but also to what your opposition is doing and to find strategic ways to weaken your adversaries. The campaign for ‘NO on 23’ did this in several ways.

The first was to deny Valero and Tesoro the alliances that the Texans had hoped to build with California oil companies, political partnerships that would mean both deep pockets of campaign cash and also many other forms of home-grown political clout. The company that the ‘NO on 23’ leaders worried about most was Chevron Oil, a major player in California’s economy and its politics. “We wanted companies [like Chevron] to know they would be vilified,” says Joseph Caves, a senior partner with the Conservation Strategy Group who helped guide the Stop Dirty Energy committee.¹⁰ ‘NO on 23’ cam-

aigners gave Chevron and others a preview of what they were in for by launching scathing media attacks against the two companies from Texas, which carried a side message to Chevron and others that this is what they would be facing if they jumped aboard the campaign to pass the initiative. Showing early that the NO forces would be strong was also important. “We knew that if we showed early money that would help keep Chevron and the other oil companies out of it,” added Friedman-Johnson.

Who led the charge?

[American Lung Association of California](#)

[Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#)

[California Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

[California Environmental Justice Alliance](#)

[California League of Conservation Voters](#)

[Communities for a Better Environment](#)

[Communities United Against the Dirty Energy Proposition](#)

[Conservation Strategy Group](#)

[Ella Baker Center for Human Rights](#)

[Environmental Defense Fund](#)

[Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger](#)

[Greenlining Institute](#)

[John Doerr](#)

[Natural Resources Defense Council](#)

[Tom Steyer](#)

⁹ From an interview with the author, Sacramento, CA, January 2011.

¹⁰ From an interview with the author, Sacramento, CA, January 2011.

Caves, Friedman-Johnson and others say that the California oil companies decided that they had too much to lose by being painted as permanent political villains in a state where they had bigger and longer-term agendas. In the end, especially in terms of financing, the two companies from Texas and the Koch brothers largely had to go it alone.

The other weaken-your-adversary strategy was to convince the two companies from Texas that they were fighting a lost cause, to prevent them from waging the \$100 million campaign the environmentalists feared. The NO campaign did this with early advertising in a handful of small media markets and by showing that it could raise significant money and put together diverse endorsements. Most important were the steady poll results showing that the NO side's messages about out-of-state oil companies, clean air, and green jobs were making passage of the measure a very difficult political task. "Our key work was to show that the initiative would be contested," said Caves. By the end of the campaign the money tsunami from Texas never materialized, the YES campaign basically 'went dark' in terms of statewide advertising, and the twin NO campaigns walked away with a historic ballot victory.

Read on

[A Perfect Storm, Lessons from the Defeat of Proposition 23](#) by Catherine Lerza.

[California Proposition 23, the Suspension of AB 32 \(2010\)](#), article in Ballotpedia

["Proposition 23: Backers Were Outspent, Out-organized"](#) *Los Angeles Times* article by Margot Roosevelt

Lessons

There is no question that the defeat of Proposition 23 was a major victory for social and environmental justice groups in California. They not only succeeded in preserving an important law in the fight against climate change, but left themselves politically stronger for future battles as well. In the wake of the campaign there is a new and diverse set of alliances that can be called on in the work ahead. The organizing efforts of Communities United and others in the state's ethnic communities represent a particular political strengthening that is likely to play an important role in the future on many issues in the state, environmental and otherwise.

But what are the lessons from the 'NO on 23' victory that reach beyond one campaign, beyond California, and offer some useful wisdom to the climate action movement more broadly? Here are four lessons that are significant:

Think Globally, Speak Locally

One of the most common errors of strategy that an advocacy campaign can make is to confuse the messages that motivate the activists supporting that campaign versus the messages that will be genuinely persuasive to the different political audiences that need to be persuaded. This is particularly a challenge in campaigns related to climate issues. The 'NO on 23' campaign did not make that error.

To be clear, the focus on clean air and green jobs was genuine. These were issues that the activists driving the 'NO' campaign cared about. But the decision to wage the 'NO on 23' campaign on the basis of those issues was also a strategic choice not to wage the campaign explicitly on the need for action on climate. Polling showed

that more direct and more local concerns are what motivated people to support their agenda and the ‘NO’ campaign adopted the strategy that held the best chance for victory.

There is much debate among environmental activists about how much to emphasize or de-emphasize climate change in advocacy campaigns on issues that relate to climate – coal infrastructure, energy policy, etc. While it is more critical than ever to educate the public about the climate change facts (particularly in the face of corporate-driven misinformation), in direct advocacy campaigns it is a mistake to miss the power that comes from talking about local concerns. The ‘NO on 23’ campaign showed what that kind of messaging can accomplish. Similar campaigns emphasizing local impacts are being waged from Washington State (over coal trains), to Kosovo (over the construction of a new coal plant) (*See the rest of our climate campaign profiles for more on these efforts*). If the aim is to win, then the message needs to be one that resonates most deeply with the people you need to convince, be they voters or policy makers.

In the U.S., Ethnic Minorities are a Key Potential Base for Environmental Politics

Proposition 23 was defeated by a strong ‘NO’ vote that cut through most every demographic in the electorate. However, it also revealed the possibility of a powerful ‘ethnicity gap’ in terms of voter’s views on the environment, one that ought to be a critical element in environmental and climate-related advocacy.

Strong political support from ethnic minority voters is the reason that Democrats have an almost virtual lock on statewide office in California. In 2010, for example, while Governor Jerry Brown lost the white vote 45% to 55%, he won the

votes of people of color 64% to 36%, propelling him to victory. Senator Barbara Boxer was reelected with similar numbers. Poll after poll demonstrates a similar ‘ethnicity gap’ on environmental issues. A 2010 statewide poll showed that while 59% of whites in California favored legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, those figures leapt to 69% among African-Americans, 75% among Asians, and 80% among Latinos. If tapped politically, that constitutes a powerful potential constituency for policy action on climate change.

In the ‘NO on 23’ campaign, Communities United demonstrated what tapping that base takes. It means speaking about the issues in ways that relate to what people care about. It means reaching immigrants in their native language. It also means reaching these populations through organizations and leaders they trust. The leaders of Communities United have pointed out that an effort like the one they waged on Proposition 23 requires the development of a long-term apparatus. It can’t simply be created from nothing every time a campaign comes along. Building a strategic, long-term, and sustainable effort to reach and mobilize people of color on environmental and climate issues is essential, not only in California but in many states across the nation where their populations are growing and becoming a larger and larger portion of the U.S. electorate.

Strategic Climate Campaigns are also Diverse Climate Campaigns

It is hard to imagine a ballot campaign with a more diverse support base than the one waged against Proposition 23. Imagine for a moment the gap of ideology, worldview, age, and culture that separated George Shultz, the Republican former Secretary of State, and the young hip hop artists

that toured college campuses across California. Bringing diverse alliances like this together is no easy task, but is essential on climate issues if political progress is going to be made.

At the national level in particular in the U.S., political action on climate is deeply polarized. The Republican Party is the only major political party left among developed nations that still holds human-caused climate change to be a theory, if not a hoax. Even without its majority in the House of Representatives, that position essentially means a blockade against policy action. The challenge nationally and in many states and localities is much the same as that faced by the 'NO on 23' effort – to simultaneously mobilize and grow the existing environmental base and to expand it into more conservative territory.

Winning campaigns, especially ballot campaigns, need all kinds of wildly different people and resources. They need people with deep financial pockets and others who can knock on their neighbors' doors in Spanish. They need people who know their way around the policy making process and others who know how to organize a protest on a corporation's doorstep. It is easy for the 'establishment' and 'non-establishment' wings of such an effort to mistrust each other and downplay the value and importance of the other.

In the 'NO on 23' effort those diverse forces concluded that the best way to be all those things at one time was to let the 'establishment' and 'non-establishment' forces each organize and run their own campaigns, but to communicate and coordinate closely. This was a change from previous models where the outreach to ethnic voters, for example, was integrated as a side event into the main campaign, with the result of it nev-

er being done well and leaving no new empowerment behind in those communities. The amiable division of focus and labor constructed to defeat Proposition 23 is a valuable model for how to do things better.

Make the 'Bad Guys' the 'Bad Guys'

In most policy debates, especially ones played out on the ballot, most people don't have time or inclination to develop a deep understanding of the issues involved. They look for short cuts and one of those short cuts is looking at who is on which side. The 'NO on 23' campaign saw early on in its polling that one of the worst political headaches that the two Texas oil companies had was that they were two Texas oil companies. They made Valero and Tesoro public villains (deservedly) and used that to define the debate.

This is a strategy that can be employed across the climate action movement and has been in effective ways. Just as Valero and Tesoro were labeled as out-of-state corporate barons, the coal industry (a primary political force against action on climate) can be and needs to be branded as the energy equivalent of the tobacco industry – corporate giants eager to use bogus science and political war chests to keep wrenching profits from products that cause serious damage to public health.

The 'NO on 23' campaign demonstrated a set of effective ways to 'demonize' corporate adversaries, from advertisements and messaging, to protests, to piggybacking on sports loyalties. Defining the debate at hand as a battle between sinister forces and honest ones is extremely valuable and across a range of climate issues it is almost always the case.

In the end it was all these diverse strategies and tactics that contributed to the 'NO on 23' victo-

ry. It would be easy in the aftermath of that victory for the different parts of the campaign – the money people, the organizers, the alliance builders, and others – to conclude that theirs was the truly key contribution. The truth is more akin to the fabled story of the three blind men who encounter an elephant. Each puts his hands on a different part and declares his description. The one holding the tail says it is like a thin reed, the one grasping a leg insists it is like a tree, and the one with his hands on the trunk announc-

es that it is like a giant snake. The truth is that the elephant is a combination of all these things and the victory against Proposition 23 was a victory of many ingredients, not one or two. Each of those ingredients holds a lesson for climate activists and taking stock of them can only make us stronger.

jimshultz@democracyctr.org

democracyctr.org/climatedemocracy



Founded in San Francisco in 1992, The Democracy Center works globally to help citizens understand and influence the public decisions that impact their lives. Through a combination of investigation and reporting, advocacy training, and leading international citizen campaigns, we have worked with social and environmental justice activists in more than three-dozen countries on five continents. As The Democracy Center begins its third decade, a special emphasis of our work is strengthening citizen action on the global climate crisis and helping citizens challenge the power of corporations.