

Measuring Ballot Measures

Despite focus on anti-gay referendums, progressive ballot initiatives may have been the real story

By Hans Johnson, *In These Times*, November 16, 2004

A funny thing happened on the way to the victory party. For progressives, the presidential campaign that drew unprecedented amounts of resources, passion, and participation ended in disaster. Bush won in large part by using one tool of the early progressive movement—the ballot measure—to whip up state-level hostility against same-sex marriage and entice a large slice of his supporters to the polls.

Voters who turned out for these measures influenced some other candidate races, too. The weak incumbent Senator Jim Bunning in Kentucky would likely have lost his reelection to insurgent Democrat Dan Mongiardo had the antigay amendment not drawn traditionalists to the polls, where it passed by a 3-to-1 margin. Not content with the bias-laden ballot drive, some Bluegrass State conservatives started a whispering campaign about Mongiardo's sexual orientation—a tactic straight from the Karl Rove playbook. Bunning narrowly won, by less than 20,000 votes statewide.

In other foul news, Florida voters approved, 65 to 35 percent, an amendment to state privacy law that will place hurdles in the path of teenage girls seeking an abortion. In Arizona, Proposition 200, which lashes out at immigrants by demanding proof of citizenship for voting registration or obtaining a library card or going to the hospital, passed 56 to 44 percent.

But, beneath the sad finale of the presidential race and the passage of 11 statewide antigay referenda, an underreported and more encouraging picture emerges when one examines state-by-state outcomes.

Progressive groups closely tied their get-out-the-vote tactics to bread-and-butter issues like better wages and health coverage, which helped to lure millions of new or infrequent voters to the polls. In a few states, progressive candidates linked their platforms and messages directly to the ballot proposals, emphasizing a people-oriented approach to government and giving voters a crisp contrast to well-funded conservatives.

In Florida and Nevada, two states where Bush narrowly edged out Kerry, progressives gained sweeping wins on proposals to lift the state minimum wage by one dollar and peg future increases to inflation. The measures won with 71 and 68 percent, respectively. And, in Colorado and Montana, progressive campaigns to raise tobacco taxes to pay for both children's health care and prescription drug coverage for the needy not only passed, but helped Democratic candidates regain power in state government.

“We made a real effort to turn out low-income women and Native Americans,” says Diane Sands, a former Montana state legislator and a leading strategist with progressive campaigns in the state. “In Missoula County, where I live, we saw 90 percent of those registered cast votes, which is incredible. Absentees, who are usually just three or four thousand, cast 12 thousand

ballots here. Administrators had to go out and copy more ballots since so many people showed up.”

Montana’s coordinated appeal proved potent for progressives. Democrat Brian Schweitzer, who made a very strong run for Senate in 2000 by calling for affordable prescription drugs, reprised those appeals this year to nab the governorship. And Democratic candidates, buoyed by once-a-decade redistricting that happens later in Montana than elsewhere, picked up six seats in the state Senate to take control, and two seats in the House to achieve near parity.

In Colorado, two efforts helped raise turnout and tip races toward state Democrats. Amendment 35, the tobacco-tax increase, passed overwhelmingly, 61 to 39 percent. And Amendment 37, which mandates 10 percent of public energy from renewable sources, proved a rallying point for environmentalists and allies, passing 53 to 47 percent. Empowered by these two vote magnets, Democrats won the open U.S. Senate seat and retook the Colorado House and Senate. In doing so, they checked their right-wing governor, Bill Owens, whose initiative to undermine job protections for state workers failed by more than 3-to-2 at the polls.

In Washington and Oregon, progressives used ballot measure appeals, such as stopping the strangulation of government through tax caps and ending nuclear waste dumps, to reach new voters and boost turnout. Each state’s senate, which had been closely divided, tipped for Democrats. In fact, in the 11 most carefully watched skirmishes for partisan control of state legislatures, Democrats won seven and ballot measures played a major role in this success.

Finally, in a widely overlooked dynamic, progressive issues outdrew reactionary issues in some key head-to-head gauges of voter enthusiasm. In Montana, for instance, about 442,000 people voted on the anti-same-sex-marriage measure, Initiative 96, which passed 66 to 34 percent. But even more voters weighed in on Initiative 147, to keep residents protected from poison by banning use of cyanide in state mining. And a still greater number, more than 445,000, voted on Initiative 149, which increases tobacco taxes to pay for health care and prescription drugs, as well as Initiative 148, which legalized small quantities of marijuana for medical purposes. In fact, more voters cast ballots on the last two initiatives than voted for governor.

A similar margin occurred in Nevada, where more voters cast ballots on Question 6, the minimum wage increase, than in the state’s U.S. Senate race.

The successes in Montana and Nevada bear out what progressives have known for a long time: Americans will choose hope over fear. But they won’t make that choice in a vacuum. Well-funded, strategic campaigns whose messages are reinforced by candidates are a crucial part of a winning formula.

As progressives plot strategy for 2006, look for a plan that uses ballot measures, and even a federal constitutional amendment, to spark a national debate about kitchen-table issues. Such a blueprint will provide a preexisting structure for the next presidential campaign and set a clear direction for the Democrats as they build on achievements in list-building and turnout. It will also give progressive voters a clear choice at the polls and an unmistakable stake in the outcome.

For a more detailed look at ballot measure results, visit the Web site of the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, <http://www.ballot.org>

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