“We’ve got to realize that we are the majority already and act like it. We don’t need to wait until we get to critical mass, we are at critical mass.”

—Bertha Lewis

Photo: Mitchell Silver, president, American Planning Association and Christy Leffall, land use coordinator, Urban Habitat at the State of the Region 2012.
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B. Jesse Clarke: What does good organizing mean to you and what were the issues that first got you involved?

Bertha Lewis: Well, you know, we’re a membership organization and we organize low- and moderate-income folks. We take our issues from our members and fight on things that affect them. But the fight has to benefit our members and at the same time, move public policy.

For years, people understood that the banks put a red line around black and brown neighborhoods and you couldn’t get credit to buy and if you could, you were exploited. After the savings and loan debacle, we saw that there was something called the Community Reinvestment Act and we created programs where folks were counseled so that they really understood about buying something that they could afford. Our interest was for them to stay in their homes long-term. For years we fought to get banks to open up and actually give credit so that low-income people could buy if they were counseled. And for years we tried to sound the alarm about predatory lending and subprime mortgages because [previously] we could not get credit into our neighborhoods. Then the banks discovered, “Ah, there’s gold in them there poor people’s hills!” and the frenzy around subprime loans and predatory lending [started]. We were railing against it but, of course, who listens to us?

Sure enough, what we predicted would happen, did happen. Here’s what folks don’t tell you about the foreclosure crisis: in New York, we had a one percent default. Why? Because all of our folks were counseled and we always counsel people into buying homes and having mortgages that can withstand any hardship. But they don’t talk about folks [who were] counseled and survived the foreclosure crisis.

Clarke: When you look back at our system, what’s the thing that’s got to change? I mean, the Community Reinvestment Act was supposed to get people into homes. But it was flipped on its head to: Let’s give them a loan package they could never repay and let’s double the price of their house and get twice as much money, and then let’s take it back and sell it for a quarter of the price back to ourselves and then sell it again! It’s terrible. If you had a crooked landlord doing this on a one-on-one basis, everybody would be going, wait a minute now. You sold it first and you sold it twice, and so on.

Lewis: But that’s exactly what’s happening.
Clarke: How are we going to change that?

Lewis: Here’s where I think all things come together. Number one, the whole financial collapse came about because there was no regulation and regulations that were on the books were not enforced because it’s the free market and, you know, business needed to thrive. We had a mindset in this country that actually worshipped rich people. So, anything that benefitted making money and rich people was fine. You see this being manifest today. There really is a war on the poor. If we can exploit you, if we can pay you below minimum wage, if we can exploit your labor, then something is wrong with you, poor people. What the Right and those conservatives understand is, there are more of us than there are of them.

The rise of the Tea Party was not accidental. You’ve got to give credit where credit is due. The day after the 2008 election when the Right lost, they immediately set about organizing... and looking at the 2010 midterm elections. This is why I’m always on a “Wake up, progressives” tour, you know? Wake up, Left! Don’t sleep here because you must organize, organize, organize all the time.

ACORN had the largest voter registration operation in the country. At its height, we accounted for 25 percent of all voter registration. Karl Rove in 2004 put his sights on us because we had a minimum wage ballot initiative in Florida. We registered over a million people and moved those people to the polls based on issues; the issue of raising the minimum wage, not on a personality. Even though George Bush won that state, people who may have voted for Bush also went to the other section of the ballot and voted to raise the minimum wage. That was dangerous. The New York Times published Karl Rove’s emails saying: This is the real danger to the Republican Party and to the Right; we must go after them. So, there ensued AttorneyGate. You remember Alberto Gonzales and the resignation of those U.S. attorneys who said, “We’re being used for political purposes.”

Clarke: Right.

Lewis: It all started with us. So, they had their sights on us for a while and developed a way to go after us. It was really quite brilliant: Take your strength and turn it against you. Discourage these new voters—young people, people of color. We’re hurtling toward being a majority minority country. You’ve got to blunt that somehow.

Clarke: Where are the places you’re starting to see emerge this powerful alliance of communities of color and progressives and women to actually turn this right side up again?

Lewis: Well, I think this is why the election this year is so important. Because you’ll begin to see, like you say, this new majority, this coalition of folks who find that they have interests in common. Women are under attack. Black folks are under attack. Brown folks are under attack. Left folks are under attack. Progressives are under attack. Our cities are under attack. People can see very clearly—it’s in their self-interest to come together. When the Right attacks, they really set up an atmosphere for groups to come together and really be stronger and fight back because the Right becomes so extreme that everyday people can see it’s crazy. But we understand that we are in a real war. There’s no complacency here. You have women of all stripes coming together saying, listen, they can pass a law in Texas cutting healthcare for 300,000 poor women, mostly black and brown. They can do some draconian things here. So I’m happy. Because, you know, as an organizer, we thrive in polarizing situations. And America is polarized more than ever before.

Clarke: Well, but you said when you were a community organizer—without any Alinsky training—you looked at the individual interest of each member—and our self-interest is at stake. We’re being attacked as progressive. We’re being attacked as people of color. We’re being attacked as women. But then, you said there was a second ingredient—what was that second ingredient?

Lewis: Public policy... It’s not just what affects your members, but what kind of policies we put in place that are going to benefit more than just your identified folks—and that’s the key.

Clarke: We need an ‘action tank’ to pick up these policies and present them out there so that this new majority can take them.

Lewis: You know what? What’s good for people of color, what’s good for black folks, is good for America.
and good for the world. Like General Motors, you know? If we don’t look at stuff from the point of view of black people and people of color here in the United States throughout this, we’re ignoring things that could help our country.

[For the Black Institute], I decided that we need to have three strategies: (1) Data, research, and polling. There are studies and data that sit on dusty shelves in academia about people of color, about black folks. But there is no company that exclusively polls people of color. We’re always a tab in a larger poll. (2) If you could bring down the data and the research and, as Malcolm X said, make it plain, [you could] turn it into public policy. Train people on how to turn it into legislation. (3) You’ve got to be able to move it on the ground, because you can have all the advocacy in the world and the best ideas in the world, but if you don’t move it on the ground through grassroots organizations and mobilize people around it, it won’t make a difference. So that’s what I want: Research, which is sort of symbolized by the head. Leadership, training and development, signified by the heart. And then, being able to move it on the ground.

Clarke: In closing, I want to give our audience at Radio RP&E a little taste of your remarks at the State of the Region... Lewis: Whether we call ourselves the new majority or just the majority, I do not accept the idea that we are going to wait until 2050 and then shazam! all of a sudden, we will be the majority. We already are. Look from city to city and from region to region and you can see people of color are already the majority. We’ve got to realize that we are the majority already and act like it. We don’t need to wait until we get to critical mass, we are at critical mass.

We’re here talking about changing demographics, what do you think the Right is doing? Voter ID and voter suppression, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the attack on healthcare and contraceptives, access to healthcare for poor women—what do all these things have to do with each other? Fear of a black planet!

We have an opportunity right now to move people to the polls based on their own self-interests and issues. So, the message is this: If we are the new majority, start acting like it! Let us make sure that electoral politics, as well as real, on-the-ground, knock-on-doors, face-to-face organizing is part of that. ■

On April 26, Urban Habitat hosted 120 Bay Area leaders for the annual State of the Region Conference at The California Endowment’s Oakland Conference Center. Social justice advocates came together to talk about equity, how to problem-solve, act, and organize.

Urban Habitat President and CEO Allen Fernandez Smith kicked off the event by celebrating the achievements of the more than 80 organizations in attendance, while outlining the important work being done in the region and all that still needs to be done moving forward.

Panel sessions explored the challenges in more depth, ranging across the board, from local and regional planning issues that affect low-income communities and people of color to the changing geography of race and class, the dissolution of redevelopment agencies, and regional agency reform. Workshops were offered to help social justice advocates build capacity to develop the tools they need to win regional campaigns, fund regional advocacy work, and build stronger inside-outside relationships with progressive decision-makers.

Keynote speakers Mitchell J. Silver, president of the American Planning Association, and Bertha Lewis, president and founder of The Black Institute, delivered exhilarating and passionate calls to action as they spoke about the changing demographic in the United States and how to ensure that low-income people and people of color have the infrastructure and policies in place to support their success. ■

For more information please visit urbanhabitat.org/sec/sor.
Voter Suppression Disenfranchises Millions

The right to vote is under attack all across our country. Conservative legislators are introducing and passing legislation that: (a) creates new barriers for those registering to vote, (b) shortens the early voting period, (c) imposes new requirements for registered voters, and (d) rigs the Electoral College in select states.

Although voter fraud is exceedingly rare, conservatives have been fabricating reasons to enact laws that disenfranchise as many potential voters as possible among certain groups, such as college students, low-income people, and minorities. Rather than modernizing our democracy to ensure that all citizens have access to the ballot box, these laws hinder voting rights in a manner not seen since the Jim Crow laws enacted in the South to disenfranchise blacks following Reconstruction.

It should be noted that these proposals being introduced in states as different as Florida and Wisconsin is no coincidence. Rather, they are drafted and distributed by corporate-backed entities like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), according to an investigative report by the Center for American Progress. Corporations, such as Koch Industries Inc., Wal-Mart Stores Inc., and The Coca-Cola Co. pay ALEC a fee for access to members of state legislatures, so that the corporate representatives and ALEC officials can work together with elected representatives to draft model legislation. As ALEC spokesperson Michael Bowman told NPR, the system is especially effective as legislators, “will ask questions much more freely at our meetings because they are not under the eyes of the press, the eyes of the voters.”

The investigative report also included a leaked copy of the model Voter ID legislation approved by ALEC’s board of directors in 2009. It prohibits certain forms of identification, such as student IDs, and has been adopted as the preferred model by both Tea Party organizations and Wisconsin’s Republican legislators, State Representative Jeff Stone and State Senator Joe Leibham.

Similar legislation had been proposed in Missouri and other states during the early part of the last decade, but it frequently failed to pass. Seeking new avenues, the George W. Bush administration prioritized the conviction of voter fraud to the point where two U.S. attorneys were allegedly fired in 2004 for failing to pursue electoral fraud cases at the level required by Attorney General John Ashcroft. But after three years of scrutiny of the 2002 elections, Ashcroft’s efforts had only produced 95 charges of election fraud. News reports from 2007, however, pointed out that simply “pursuing an investigation can be just as effective as a conviction in providing that ammunition and creating an impression with the public that some sort of electoral reform is necessary.”

Having laid the groundwork, ALEC is now spearheading these antivoting laws anew. A number of nonpartisan organizations ranging from Rock the Vote to the League of Women Voters to the Public Interest Research Group, are challenging ALEC’s efforts. Additionally, the Department of Justice is reviewing some of the new state laws for possible violations of the Voting Rights Act in nine southern states because of their history of voter suppression in the past.

Speaking on the subject at the Campus Progress National Conference in Washington, D.C. on July 6, 2011, President Bill Clinton told the young audience that the reason why laws making it harder to vote were being proposed and passed across the country was that “They are trying to make the 2012 electorate look
more like the 2010 electorate than the 2008 electorate.” Conservatives are scared because more young and minority voters are entering voting age and their collective impact is growing accordingly. In 2008, about 48 million millennial generation voters—those born between 1978 and 2000—were old enough to vote. By 2012, that number will be 64 million, or 29 percent of all eligible voters. According to analysis by the Center for American Progress, by 2020, all of the millennial generation—about 90 million—will be eligible to vote and will comprise around 40 percent of American voters.4

Simultaneously, the number of minority voters has increased from 15 to 26 percent between 1988 and 2008.5 These young and minority voters strongly support progressive staples, such as investing in renewable energy6 and maintaining Social Security,7 which affects election results. In 2008, young voters and Hispanics delivered two-thirds of their votes to President Obama.8

The growing influence of staunchly progressive voters has conservatives scared to the point of extreme measures. Backed by large corporate donors, they are looking for any proposal or law that will help negate this change in voting demographics. While this is their motivation, the right to vote is an American right that should be protected for those of all political persuasions.

Right now, the protection of anti-voter suppression measures put in place during the 1960s is preventing the enactment of the Voter ID law in key states. In some states, the issue will become a ballot measure whose outcome is decided by the voters, while in others, the laws have already been passed and must be aggressively challenged through legal and electoral measures, so that our system of democratic elections can get back on the right track.

Endnotes
8. Teixeira, New Progressive America.
Latino, African American Political Clout Grows in Florida and North Carolina

By Chris Kromm

The face of the Southern electorate is changing and nowhere is the shift clearer than in Florida and North Carolina. In these two critical battleground states, the share of white voters has shrunk since the 2008 presidential election, while the number of African American, Latino and other people of color voters has steadily grown. However, new voting restrictions could undermine the political potential of this shift towards an increasingly diverse electorate.

According to an analysis of state voter registration data by the Institute for Southern Studies (southernstudies.org), the most rapid change has been in North Carolina, where the percentage of voters who identify as Hispanic doubled between 2008 and 2012. Even more striking, the share of the electorate identifying as “other”—that is, not white, black, Hispanic, or American Indian—rose by 252 percent. Overall, the total number of voters not identifying as white has grown by 5.6 percent in four years, bringing their share of the electorate to 29 percent.

The chart below shows how the North Carolina and Florida voting populations have shifted. (In North Carolina the period is from March 2008 to May 2012. The second row in the chart shows how Florida’s electorate changed between the July 2008 general primary and the January 2012 presidential primary).

These trends have put North Carolina remarkably close to Florida, where voters of color grew a more modest 2.2 percent between July 2008 and January 2012, but still represent 30 percent of all registered voters.

If the number of voter registrations for black, Latino and other communities of color seem lower than expected given recent census data, the reason may lie with the sweeping new restrictions that have forced the League of Women Voters to cease registration drives entirely while the new laws undergo court review.

Restrictions Hamper Voter of Color Registrations

A March 2012, New York Times article—drawing on analysis by University of Florida political scientist Daniel Smith—found that in the eight months since the state’s new laws went into effect, 81,000 fewer new voters had been added to the rolls, compared to the same period four years ago.

Civil rights advocates have argued that the restrictions would hit African American and Latino voters hardest because, as the Brennan Center and others have noted, they are more than twice as likely to register through registration drives as white voters.

Additionally, there is concern that bills requiring picture IDs (passed in Florida and likely to be on the North Carolina Republican agenda for the current legislative session), limits on early voting, and attempts to end Sunday “Souls to the Polls” turnout drives can and will disproportionately impact the ability of voters of color to exercise their political clout.

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Chris Kromm is the executive director and publisher of Facing South and Southern Exposure, where an earlier version of this article appeared.
In Arizona, VOCs now make up 24 percent of the voting population. In 2008, an impressive 74 percent of registered voters went to the polls. In Phoenix, long a Republican stronghold, the population grew by 9.4 percent to nearly 1.5 million with significant numbers of them being people of color. The city recently elected a Latino city councilman and a Democrat for mayor.

A similar dynamic exists in Georgia. The current political landscape resembles that of 1998 when hyper-partisan rhetoric motivated communities of color to get out and vote. With a 30 percent VOC share of the electorate, candidates of color made significant gains then and progressive candidates won the governorship and Democrats retained control of both houses of the legislature.

Today, people of color in Georgia make up close to 35 percent of the voting age population. In the 2008 general election, VOCs made up 34 percent of the vote share. If every eligible VOC votes in 2012, the potential impact would be significant, especially in cities like Atlanta and Athens-Clark County, which together have over 230,000 "key" VOCs.

**Electoral Impact of Reactionary Policies**

From the rhetoric on immigration in states like Arizona and Georgia and the threats to veto the DREAM Act, to the voter suppression and "stand your ground" laws, progressives and communities of color have had their rights, their families, their dreams, and their lives trampled upon. Now they have had enough and are starting to take a stand and fight back.

The Supreme Court hearings over Arizona’s SB 1070 law caught the attention of people of color everywhere and now we are seeing signs of an energized electorate. With enough resources, this energy could be transformed into a victory for candidates, such as Arizona’s Richard Carmona for U.S. Senate and Kyrsten Sinema for U.S. Congress, and Georgia’s Stacey Abrams for State General Assembly. In fact, if enough determined voters go to the polls, regressive policies can be replaced by progressive laws in states like Arizona and Georgia.

History has shown that VOCs can make a difference in the outcome of elections. A case in point is Illinois, where the total vote increased from 10 percent in 2006 to 19 percent in 2010. The strong turnout from VOCs brought a candidate (Pat Quinn) who embraced progressive views to the governorship—with just one-third of the white vote.

By closing the gap between eligible and likely voters, we will have a better chance of regaining our voice and enacting progressive policies. A progressive candidate could win Georgia with just 41 percent and Arizona with just 37 percent of the white vote.

African Americans and progressive whites have often come together before and can continue to do so to develop transformational relationships that dramatically impact politics, culture, and economics. But we must also remember that the local political machines have never just been about whites and African Americans but also Latinos, Asians and Native Americans. So, rather than creating anxiety in political circles, the expanding share of the electorate of these communities should reinforce our commitment to an all-inclusive brand of politics.

Kirk Clay is the senior advisor for PowerPAC (powerpac.org), an organization focused on politics and civic engagement.
In 1960, the young civil rights movement faced a split between advocates of direct action and electoral work. The movements for justice today face a similar divide, between direct action strategies, such as Occupy and more traditional efforts to advance the agenda through the electoral system.

In the summer of 1960, Amzie Moore, Medgar Evers, and other local Black leaders in Mississippi told Bob Moses that they needed help with voter registration more than they needed demonstrations against segregation. He promised he would return in the summer of ’61, and in July, he began voter registration work in McComb, Mississippi. Staunch long-time Movement supporters, such as Harry Belafonte and many of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leaders also believed that SNCC should focus on voter registration rather than direct action, such as sit-ins and Freedom Rides. They argued that poor, rural blacks had no money for lunch counters or other public facilities and that what they needed most was political power that in Mississippi had to begin with winning the right to vote.

Other SNCC leaders—many just released from Parchman Prison and Hinds County Jail—argued that the Freedom Rides and other forms of direct action must continue. The protests were gaining momentum and bringing the Movement into the darkest corners of the Deep South, raising awareness, building courage, and inspiring young and old. They were deeply suspicious of President John F. Kennedy’s demand that they switch from demonstrations to voter registration, and they were unwilling to abandon the tactics that had brought the Movement so far in so short a time.

In August, the issue came to a head when SNCC met at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. After three days of passionate debate, SNCC was split right down the middle—half favored continuing direct action, the others favored switching to voter registration. Ella Baker proposed a compromise—do both. Her suggestion was adopted.

Amid the fires of the Freedom Rides and the heat of debate, SNCC as an organization was rapidly evolving away from its campus/student roots. More and more SNCC activists were leaving school to become full-time freedom fighters. With money raised by Belafonte, first Charles Sherrod, then Bob Moses, and then others were hired as SNCC “field secretaries,” devoting their lives to the struggle in the rural areas and small towns of the South.

As so often turns out to be the case, when committed activists passionately disagree over strategy, both sides are proven correct. Both direct action and voter registration are needed. Each supports and strengthens the other. The determination and courage of student protesters inspires and encourages their elders, and the growing political power of adults organized around the right to vote supports and sustains the young demonstrators. Instead of splitting the organization apart, they forge a unifying compromise. By respecting that fellow activists could passionately disagree over strategy and tactics—yet remain allies—they strengthened SNCC and the Movement as a whole.

In 2012, supporting candidates and ballot initiatives are not really equivalent to fighting for full citizenship for African Americans as in the 1950s and 60s. Then, voter registration was an assertion of equal citizenship and social equality against white-supremacy. Voter registration was a more radical and confrontational challenge to the powers-that-were than were direct actions, such as Freedom Rides and sit-ins. Far more people were killed and jailed fighting for the vote than were for sit-ins against segregation. So, in a sense, it turned out that voter-registration was a form of direct action.

That said, our movement today has to incorporate both direct action and electoral engagement. It is as true today as it was back then. For me, the most important lesson is that by respecting the fact that fellow activists could passionately disagree over strategy and tactics—yet remain allies—they strengthened SNCC and the Movement as a whole.

Bruce Hartford was active with CORE, SCLC from 1963-67 in Alabama, Mississippi and California. This article is excerpted from a timeline of the Southern Freedom Movement during the years 1951-68, published at crmvet.org.

Interview with Viridiana Martinez
By Christine Joy Ferrer

Viridiana Martinez, 25—undocumented, unafraid and unashamed. Martinez is co-founder of the North Carolina Dream Team and a young community organizer and activist for immigrant rights. She only discovered her illegal status after graduating from high school. Born in Mexico and raised in a little town in North Carolina called Sanford, she has lived in the United States since the age of seven, when her parents immigrated. The NC DREAM Team is an organization composed of undocumented immigrant youth and allies, dedicated to the creation of a sustainable, community-led immigrant rights movement in North Carolina and to helping undocumented youth recognize their individual and collective power to activate their communities.

Christine Joy Ferrer: What was it like growing up as a young, undocumented Latina in the South and how has your identity influenced your work?

Viridiana Martinez: If you look at the undocumented youth movements, most of the founders and cofounders are women. A lot of us are getting older; we’ve had to grow up so much more quickly than some of our more advantaged peers. I’m not in California. I’m not in Miami. I’m not in New York or Texas. I’m in North Carolina. Reality in the South is a lot different than any of these places. There is no Chicano movement. Many of us are the first generation of Mexican and Latin American immigrants. The history of this region is the struggle existing. We’re the pioneers in terms of immigration work, immigrant rights, and activism. The challenges we face can be seen in either of two ways. One, this is so challenging, I’m not going to do it and I don’t want to get involved, or two, this is challenging, this is risky, and this is crazy but I need to do it. We need this open mind; this uninhibited creativity to seek different opportunities in spite of obstacles. Let’s find opportunity in these tragedies to organize and to expose our reality.

I have the privilege of being a fair-skinned Latina, and I’m fluent in English, so I don’t get profiled as much or as often as other people do. It’s different being a fair-skinned Latina fluent in English in the South compared to a farm worker who’s not fluent in English and not fair-skinned. Being aware of my own privilege I think is very important in doing this work.

I got pulled over a month or so ago for speeding. My license expired last year. The cop came to my window and gave me the ticket and said, “You know why I pulled you over—for speeding. And I’m also giving you a ticket for driving with an expired license. You know it’s been expired since last July, right? Why haven’t you gotten it renewed?”

And I said, “Because I can’t, I’m undocumented.”

I’m at a point where I’m like, why the hell do I need to hide this reality? This is what I’m living. But this consciousness isn’t the same situation for all immigrants. Many are still living with this internalized pressure.

Deportations are happening every single day through programs like 287G and Secure Communities. Supposedly, it’s to find criminals but our people are getting racially profiled. In the South, you have these like hick cops that are pulling over our folks everyday. They position themselves strategically near mobile homes and trailer parks or in neighborhoods that are predominately immigrant. They do so to target our people. I get three to five calls at least every two weeks, or emails saying: “My son is getting deported. My daughter got pulled over. What do we do?”
Ferrer: What did the release of Uriel Aldesto, an undocumented youth, mean for the immigrant community, activists, and others who have been mobilizing against deportations, institutionalized discrimination and the exploitation of their communities?

Martinez: This was a major victory in the fight against deportations. It proves that a community standing behind a person can move mountains. But it also exposed the structural racism and discrimination within our communities. It was also a reflection of our reality. Aldesto has a criminal background. Most of our youth are not valedictorians. They are not the cream of the crop necessarily in terms of what Anglo schools want to define as the cream of the crop. They don’t have the perfect, squeaky-clean profiles. We grow up facing some real life challenges and some of us are lucky to have both of our parents healthy, working and loving each other. We must continue to organize the community, get youth to understand the importance of coming out as undocumented, and educate people. Sometimes a family doesn’t realize the seriousness of the situation until one of their own is put in deportation proceedings or picked up for driving without a license or for something that simple.

Ferrer: What is necessary to achieve a just reform that is acceptable to and guided by the voices of those directly affected by our broken immigration system?

Martinez: Whatever legislation is necessary to serve our undocumented immigrant community, we first need those directly affected to speak for themselves.

Our youth who are graduating from high school feel absolutely hopeless. This is very real, the pain, the anger, the confusion, and lack of hope, because you don’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. There are cases where some have committed suicide. One of our biggest focuses right now is on the mental health of undocumented immigrants. We’re hearing more and more stories of undocumented youth and adults living with mental health issues. Whether it’s depression, anxiety, attempted suicide, or that we’re hurting ourselves. Sometimes the help you need, to just hear that you’re not alone, or to vent with somebody, requires the understanding from those who are in the same boat.

We need to take the leadership as undocumented youth and organize. We need to create spaces, whether it’s at youth empowerment summits, rallies or town hall meetings, where youth can get together. We must take the time to develop relationships, by creating a safe space where more undocumented youth can open up about their lives, about the abuse, the trauma, that they have lived to get on the path to liberation—a space where they are not afraid or ashamed. Where they are understood more than anything.

And having allies that are conscientious, who admit, “I am never going to know what it’s like to be in your position because I have papers, but want to help.” These are the people that we need beside us, behind us, so that we can be in the forefront and feel supported. And if we fall, somebody’s going to catch us as we fight for this. All this, in consequence, leads to lobbying efforts, rallies, and protests, where youth are no longer afraid to hold a blow horn and speak out.

That’s why these organizations that are undocumented youth-led and for undocumented youth are so important. We’re not just talking about legislation anymore. We’re talking about our own daily lives. And we need to be our own power. We need to be our own voice. We need to be our biggest advocates.
How Mississippi's Black-Brown Strategy Beat the South's Anti-Immigrant Wave

By David Bacon

In April 2012, an anti-immigrant bill similar to the ones passed in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina legislatures was stopped cold in Mississippi—contrary to all expectations.

Tea Party Republicans, confident of rolling over any opposition, had enlisted Kansas Secretary of State and co-author of Arizona’s SB 1070 Kris Kobach, to push the bill with Mississippi state Representative Becky Currie, who introduced it. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which designs and introduces similar bills across the country, also had its agents on site in Jackson. The timing could not have been better. In November 2011, Republicans took control of the state House of Representatives for the first time since Reconstruction, making Mississippi one of the last Southern states to give up Democratic control of the legislature—a final triumph for the Nixon/Reagan Southern Strategy. But these were not just any Republicans. When Governor Haley Barbour, now ironically considered a “moderate Republican,” stepped down, voters replaced him with Phil Bryant, a rabid anti-immigrant whose venom rivals that of Lou Dobbs.

And yet, the seemingly inevitable did not happen.

Instead, the state’s Legislative Black Caucus fought a dogged rearguard war from the opening of the legislative session in January 2012. Over the preceding decade, the Caucus had acquired a reputation for defeating over 200 anti-immigrant measures. This session, however, they had lost all the crucial committee chairmanships that had made it possible for them to kill the earlier bills. But they did not lose their voice.

“We forced a great debate in the House, until 1:30 in the morning,” says state Representative Jim Evans, caucus leader and AFL-CIO staff member. “When you have a prolonged debate like that, it shows the widespread concern and disagreement. People began to see the ugliness in this measure.”

People’s Voice Trumps Special Interest on HB 488

Like the other bills created by Kobach and ALEC, HB 488 stated its intent clearly: “to make attrition through enforcement of the public policy of all state agencies and local governments.” In other words, to make life so difficult and unpleasant for undocumented people that they leave the state. Without papers, residents would not be able to get so much as a bicycle license or a library card, and schools would have to inform authorities about the immigration status of their students. And the police were mandated to verify the immigration status of all they arrested—an open invitation to racial profiling.

“The night HB 488 came to the floor, many black legislators spoke against it, including some who’d never spoken out on immigration before,” says Bill Chandler, director of the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA). “One objected to the use of the term ‘illegal alien’, while others said it justified breaking up families and ethnic cleansing.”

Many white legislators were also inspired to speak against the bill. Nevertheless, it was rammed through the House to the Senate, also controlled by Republicans for some years but presided over by the more moderate Lieutenant Governor Tate Reeves. Reeves could see the widespread opposition to the bill, even among employers, and was less inclined to toe the Tea Party line. Instead, he appointed Hob Bryan, a rural Democrat, to chair one of the Senate’s two judiciary committees and sent him HB 488. Bryan’s committee killed it.

On the surface, it appears as if fissures within the Republican Party facilitated the bill’s demise, but the real reason lies elsewhere.
As the debate and maneuvering played out in the capitol building, its halls and grounds were filled with angry protests and noisy demonstrations for several days. The grassroots upsurge produced political alliances that cut deeply into the bill’s support, and calls for its rejection came from the sheriffs’ and county supervisors’ associations, the Mississippi Economic Council (a.k.a. chamber of commerce), and employers—from farms to poultry packers.

That upsurge was neither spontaneous nor a last-minute emergency mobilization.

“We wouldn’t have had a chance against this without 12 years of organizing work,” Evans explains. “We worked on the conscience of people night and day, and built coalition after coalition. Over time, people have come around. The way people think about immigration in Mississippi today is nothing like the way they thought when we started.”

Two Decades of Strategic Organizing Pays Off

In the late 1990s, veterans of Mississippi’s social movements like Evans, Chandler, attorney Patricia Ice, Father Jerry Tobin, activist Kathy Sykes, and union organizer Frank Curiel came together—not in the hope of stopping a bill 12 years later—but to build political power. Their vehicle was MIRA, which partnered with the Legislative Black Caucus and other coalitions fighting most of the progressive issues facing the state.

Their strategy was based on the state’s changing demographics. Over the last two decades, the percentage of African Americans in Mississippi has been rising. Black families driven from jobs by factory closures in the north have been moving back in a reversal of the Great Migration of the last century. Today, at least 37 percent of Mississippi’s population is African American—the highest of any state in the country.

Following the boom in casino construction in the 1990s, people from Mexico and Central America, displaced by NAFTA and CAFTA, started migrating into the state to work in the poultry plants, farms and factories. Guest workers were also brought in for the Gulf Coast reconstruction and shipyards. Today, Mississippi has several established Latino communities whose children are achieving voting age.

In MIRA’s political calculation, blacks, immigrants and unions are the potential pillars of a powerful political coalition. HB 488’s intent to drive away immigrants is an effort to make that coalition impossible.

MIRA is not just focused on defeating bad bills. It built a grassroots base by fighting immigration raids at the Howard Industries plant in Laurel (2008) and at other worksites, and its activist staff has helped families survive sweeps at apartment houses and trailer parks. MIRA also brought together black workers suspicious of the Latino influx and immigrant families worried about settling in a hostile community, with the idea that political unity based in neighborhoods protects all groups.

For unions organizing poultry plants, factories and casinos, MIRA became a resource helping to win over immigrant workers. It also brought labor violation cases against employers in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Alliance of Friends and Adversaries Pays Off

Despite being adversaries otherwise, employers and MIRA both opposed workplace immigration raids based on the “attrition through enforcement” idea and recognized a mutual interest in fighting HB 488. Since 1986, U.S. immigration law has forbidden undocumented people to work by making it illegal to hire them. The enforcement of this law (part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986), especially
under the Bush and Obama administrations, has caused thousands of workers to be fired. In the last decade, Congressional proposals for comprehensive immigration reform have called for strengthening sanctions and increasing raids and firings.

“Those bills violate the human rights of working people to feed their families,” says Chandler. “Employers... didn’t like workplace enforcement either. All their associations claimed they didn’t hire undocumented workers, but we all know who’s working in the plants. We want people to stay as much as the employers do.”

During the protests, the organizers underlined this point by giving legislators sweet potatoes with labels saying, “I was picked by immigrant workers who together contribute $82 million to the state’s economy.”

“Forcing people from their jobs forces them to leave,” Chandler continues. “[That’s] an ethnic cleansing tactic.”

Although MIRA allied with employers over HB 488 for tactical reasons, it is primarily a labor coalition that helps workers defend themselves against employers. In fact, MIRA has actively fought guest worker programs used by the Mississippi casinos and shipyards to recruit workers with few labor rights. To fight HB 488, MIRA bussed in members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1529 from poultry plants in Scott County, laborers from Laurel, Retail and Wholesale union members from Carthage, catfish workers from Indianola, and electrical union members from Crystal Spring. The black labor mobilization was largely organized by the new pro-immigrant leadership of the state chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the AFL-CIO constituency group for black union members.

Religious congregations—Catholics, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Evangelical Lutherans, Muslims, and Jews—along with the Mississippi Human Services Coalition, also brought people to protest HB 488. The groups around MIRA and the Black Caucus fought not only this bill, but many others introduced by Tea Party Republicans, on a wide range of issues: banning abortions when fetal heartbeat is detected; promoting charter schools; restricting access to workers compensation benefits; and taking away civil service protection from state employees.

Big Picture is Bleak Without Sustained Organizing

According to Dr. Ivory Phillips, a MIRA director and member of the Board of Trustees of the Jackson Public School District, charter school proposals, voter ID requirements, and anti-immigrant measures are all linked.

“Because white supremacists fear losing their status as the dominant group in this country, there is a war against brown people today, just as there has long been a war against black people,” he says. “In all three cases—charter schools, immigration reform, and voter IDs—what we are witnessing is an anti-democratic surge, a rise in overt racism, and a refusal to provide opportunities to all.”

Tea Party supporters also see these issues as linked. Following the defeat of HB 488 and in the wake of a debate on charter schools, Representative Reecy Dickson, a leading Black Caucus member, was surrounded by a shoving crowd, which hurled racist epithets at her.

“We need political alliances that mean something in the long term,” says Chandler. “Permanent alliances and a strategy for winning political power that includes targeted voter registration that focuses on specific towns, neighborhoods and precincts.”
Selma to Montgomery March:
From Voting Rights to Immigration 1965-2012

By Alma Campos

Every year, the NAACP holds a rally from March 4-9 to commemorate the Selma to Montgomery march and draw attention to the issues facing African Americans in America. Since the passage of Alabama’s HB 56—the nation’s worst anti-immigrant law—the NAACP has reached out to organizations around the country to build lasting relationships between Civil Rights and Immigrant Rights communities over their common history of struggle. The event marks the coming together of a broad movement for a renewed call for civil rights in America. This year, a core part of their agenda was a demand to repeal HB 56.

Gamaliel, a grassroots network of non-partisan, faith-based organizations in 18 U.S. states, South Africa and the United Kingdom, is now taking on the voting rights issue. They are working together with the NAACP and other social justice organizations on “Get out the Vote” initiatives for the Fall elections.

Among the participants in the Selma to Montgomery march this year was 28-year-old Carlos Pinedo, who emigrated from Mexico with his family at the age of eight. In the racially diverse community in Chicago’s South Suburbs, young Pinedo soon became conscious of the tensions and boundaries between blacks, Latinos and whites and quickly adopted the racial stereotypes he learned from his new friends. Growing up in Blue Island, Illinois, Carlos and his brother Jose became targets of racial profiling themselves. Things took a nasty turn when Jose was arrested by ICE officers in front of his mother on Mother’s Day for failing to present a state-issued picture ID to police officials who were questioning him for no legitimate reason. He was deported to Mexico, leaving behind his family and newborn child.

The incident prompted Carlos to become a leader with the South Suburban Action Conference (SSAC) and Gamaliel’s Civil Rights of Immigrants Task Force, working to raise awareness about racial profiling and its negative impact on families. In 2010, SSAC was able to persuade Blue Island Mayor Donald Peloquin to sign a resolution allowing undocumented immigrants to present the Matricula Consular as a valid form of identification.

Pinedo decided to participate in the march because, as he says, “I felt that now more than ever, I needed to show my community that what I have been working for is really worth it. In this way, I can stand for the ones who have no voice.”

The march made Pinedo acutely aware of other communities all over the U.S. who have been fighting for the same thing—namely, human rights.

The Reverend David Bigsby, co-founder and president of the Gamaliel National Clergy Council, also attended the march. He was at Morehouse College in Atlanta during the 1965 Selma-Montgomery March. “Voting rights were especially important to me because neither my parents nor anyone in our family had ever voted, except me,” he recalls. “They feared what would happen if they attempted to register. Most of them could not read very well and did not think their vote would make a difference. The 1965 march caused my father to find the courage to vote for the first time. He had served in WWII but did not feel he was a valued citizen.”

One young leader with Gamaliel, Eliza Perez-Montalvo, is responding to the call for renewed black-brown unity, saying: “Marching today is the beginning of my journey.”

Alma Campos is the communications coordinator for Pilsen Neighbors Community Council, a Gamaliel affiliate.

Despite the national implications of stopping HB 488, the resources for the effort were almost all local. When MIRA emptied its bank account over the fight, additional money came mostly from local units of organizations like the UAW, UNITE HERE and the Muslim Association.

“The resources of the national immigrant rights movement should prioritize preventing bills from passing as much as fighting them after the fact,” warns Chandler.

On the surface, the fight in Jackson was a defensive battle waged in the wake of the Republican takeover of the legislature because the Tea Party threatens to bring HB 488 back until it passes. Yet Evans, who also chairs MIRA’s board, believes that time is on the side of social change. “These Republicans still have tricks up their sleeves,” he cautions. “We’re worried about redistricting and a Texas-style stacking of the deck. But in the end, we still believe our strategy will build power in Mississippi. We don’t see last November as a defeat but as the last stand of the Confederacy.”

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The story is tragic and seemingly incomprehensible, especially when you learn that the driver of the vehicle was eventually caught, admitted to driving under the influence of alcohol and prescription drugs, had two previous hit-and-run convictions, and was blind in one eye—but received just six months in jail under a plea bargain. However, taken in the context of Atlanta’s history, the incident does not seem so strange and is a good illustration of the challenges Atlanta faces going forward.

Tragic Story

Nelson and her three children lived in an apartment complex in a northern suburb of Atlanta. Since she did not have a car, grocery shopping entailed catching two buses to the nearest WalMart with three kids—a nine-, four-, and two-year-old—in tow. On that fateful day (April 10, 2010), the bus was late picking them up from WalMart, which caused them to miss their connection. It being a Saturday, they had to wait an hour for the next bus and only arrived at their stop—located along a busy five-lane arterial where vehicles travel at 50 miles per hour—after dark.

The nearest traffic signal with a crosswalk being a third of a mile up the street, bus riders routinely crossed the street near the stop, and that evening was no exception. As Nelson, carrying the toddler and the groceries paused at the narrow median, four-year-old A.J. darted into the road. When Nelson attempted to pull him to safety, a van hit all three, killing A.J. and injuring Nelson and her youngest.

A few months later, the grieving mother was arrested and charged with vehicular homicide because, according to the county prosecutor, she had caused her son’s death by illegally crossing the street. Fortunately for Nelson, on July 26, 2011 a judge agreed to give her a new trial and she has since filed an appeal to get all the charges dismissed.

Atlanta’s History Shapes Present Realities

A.J. Nelson was killed on Austell Road, a state highway that cuts across suburban Cobb County, carrying around 40,000 vehicles per day. The traffic signals are spaced over half a mile apart to provide the least delay for drivers; and sidewalks, if they exist, are an afterthought. Whoever planned, built and expanded the road to carry an increasing number of cars never imagined the needs of people like Raquel and her children because suburban Atlanta was built for the car.

When the civil rights movement succeeded in integrating public facilities in Atlanta—schools, transit, parks, and pools—the white population responded by fleeing to the suburbs to create enclaves of private space. In the 1960s, about 60,000 whites moved out of the city of Atlanta while the population of Cobb County increased by 83,000 or 72 percent. Rapid economic growth in the region and subsidized mortgages made the suburbs—with low-density housing connected to commercial destinations by high speed arterials—affordable to middle class families. And post World War II investment in transportation infrastructure made the suburbs more accessible—but only if you had a car.

In 1965, voters in Cobb County—which was 94 percent white—rejected an option to join the newly forming Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) because they did not want the poor African Americans they had fled in Atlanta to be able to reach their communities. Similar decisions were made by two other suburban counties, which is why the heavy rail network is limited to the two counties containing the city of Atlanta.
A Landscape Determined by Race Shifts

In 2010 when Nelson was staying in Cobb County it was only 56 percent white. After decades of white flight the demographics of the region changed; the poor and people of color were pushed and pulled out of the city. The majority of the economic growth in the region took place in the northern suburbs. Despite the lack of public transit, workers were drawn to the job prospects. Middle class African American families left the city to escape failing schools and high crime rates. Immigrants from Latin America and Asia settled along a major arterial out of northeast Atlanta. The poor quality housing stock built immediately after World War II transitioned into affordable housing. By 2010, 85 percent of Atlanta's poor lived in the suburbs.

In response some white households moved farther out to the second ring of suburbs or in some cases back to the city. In the 1990s the white population in the City of Atlanta started to increase, in part attracted by the public amenities of living in the city. Intown neighborhoods were gentrified and poorer residents forced out. In the run up to the 1996 Summer Olympic games, Atlanta began demolishing all of its public housing projects. The city is still majority non-white, but in the last census it lost 30,000 African American residents and gained 22,000 white ones.

The vast majority of low-income and minority residents have cars, as evidenced by the fact that only three percent of all trips in the region are taken on public transit. For the six percent of households that do not have a car, getting around is very hard because buses are infrequent—averaging once every 30 minutes during peak hours—and only about 12 percent of the region is accessible by transit. Like Raquel Nelson, transit riders in the Atlanta region tend to be the poorest of the poor—making only 37 percent of the median income of the region—and are overwhelmingly people of color. (Fewer than 20 percent are white.)

Transit is systemically underfunded in Atlanta and recently, one suburban county to the south cut bus services entirely. Owing to race and geographic politics, the state of Georgia does...
not contribute to transit operations, making MARTA the largest transit system in the U.S. without state assistance. The only dedicated source of transit funding is a one-cent sales tax in the two counties containing the city of Atlanta.

Transportation Choices, but not for the Poor

Nelson was riding on a Cobb Community Transit bus the night A.J. was killed. In response to the shifting demographics, Cobb and two other suburban counties started their own bus service and are now pushing plans to have rail service extended to them.

Historically, transit has been seen as a social service, a way to get poor people to the most basic of destinations, and not vital transportation infrastructure. But now, a coalition of environmental and business groups and elected local officials view rail as critical to Atlanta’s ability to compete globally and a way to relieve congestion on the freeways. They are pushing for a new sales tax measure to fund transportation projects in the region, half of which are transit.

Previously the transportation problem in Atlanta was defined by elites as congestion but the discourse is shifting towards providing more choices. Choices not for people like Nelson, who have to depend on infrequent buses and walk on unsafe roads, but for automobile users who cannot easily access public transit.

Although the discourse around transit is changing, none of the jury that convicted Nelson had ever been on a bus in the region—except for the special MARTA bus that shuttles fans to the Atlanta Braves games from the nearest rail station. (That service continued uninterrupted even when service for everyday riders was cut by 11 percent.) From their perspective as automobile users, the jury members could not understand the choices Nelson had to make or the risks she had to take on a daily basis, navigating the transit system with her children. They apparently believed that the onus was on her—the pedestrian—to avoid the intoxicated driver and that she should have walked the extra two-thirds mile to use the crosswalk.

Sadly, A.J. Nelson is part of a growing statistic; currently Atlanta has an average annual rate of 1.6 pedestrian fatalities per 100,000 residents. The increase is partially due to the mismatch between the transportation infrastructure and the needs of a growing population of low-income and immigrant residents in the suburbs. Families with children trying to cross busy multilane highways is a common sight, as are dirt paths paralleling roads where no sidewalks exist.

Infrastructure and Institutional Solutions Needed

Not much has changed on Austell Road since A.J.’s death. The transit agency put up a sign at the bus stop warning people to use the crosswalk up the road. But it is routinely ignored by area residents.

Atlanta needs to undertake a serious retrofit of its auto-oriented land use and transportation infrastructure to avoid repeating this tragedy and to accommodate or even encourage transit use. It is especially important now that the poor and carless are increasingly residing in the suburbs. The current push for new transit is focused on creating options for drivers, especially rail. But transit that focuses on serving peak hour trips or requires car access does not help the carless mother trying to get her groceries on a Saturday afternoon. Instead of choices, the solution needs to be accessibility for everyone.

In order for this to occur, the empathy gap between someone like Nelson and the members of the jury has to be bridged. Although they live in the same community, they have no concept of each other’s lives. Changing perceptions about transit as a mode will require changing the perceptions of people who use it. This means not ignoring Atlanta’s history of race and class divisions.

The ending of this story is yet to be determined; Nelson gets a new trial and Atlanta has the ability to change its path. Recognition of the institutional structure of inequity and a commitment to reversing this legacy in transportation and regional development policies can reshape Atlanta’s future.

Laurel Paget-Seekins has lived in Atlanta for seven years without a car and works with the Partnership for Southern Equity to develop and advocate for a just transportation and development policy. She has a Ph.D. in Civil Engineering.
California’s Broken Ballot Initiative System Endangers Civil Rights

By Michelle Romero

Ballot initiatives play an increasingly important role in setting policy in California on every issue from healthcare and the environment to same-sex marriage. In 1911, when wealthy special interests had corrupted politics in Sacramento and crippled the people’s ability to hold government accountable, California established the initiative, referendum, and recall to give the people the power to make or unmake their own state laws and to remove their elected officials. But today, that system is not functioning as it was intended, especially for California’s new majority.

Wealthy special interest dollars fuel the initiative economy, which coupled with a lack of review and oversight, plus poor voter education on ballot measures, has led to poorly drafted proposals, legal challenges and attacks on people’s civil rights. This is not the empowering direct democracy reformers had envisioned.

In 2011, the Greenlining Institute launched an unprecedented effort to identify a set of reforms to fix our broken system. With funding from California Forward, the James Irvine Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, we conducted a two-part public opinion survey of a representative sample of California adults in June and December, 2011.1 More importantly, we convened 17 community listening sessions across 14 cities to learn more about real voter experiences, attitudes and ideas for direct democracy. The input we received from the community, in addition to that from a 33-member advisory panel of policy experts, good government groups, and community-based leaders, helped us develop a reform agenda that can start to return the initiative system to its “citizen democracy” roots.

Following is a summary of key findings from our poll and listening tour, along with recommendations for reform.

Initiatives Often Attack Civil Rights

Our survey found that 73 percent of California voters believe the rights of various groups of people are often attacked via the initiative system, while 44 percent felt their own rights have been attacked. Some of these initiatives have proven unconstitutional but owing to a lack of review or oversight prior to voting, their violations only become apparent after they are litigated and overturned in court. We need a mechanism to keep the initiative system from being misused or abused. One way—favored by 81 percent of California voters—would be to review proposals for legal and constitutional issues and drafting errors before they get on the ballot.

Considering the costs of signature-gathering, running a campaign, and litigation, a system of review and oversight at the front end of the process could save both the state and initiative proponents money, while reducing attacks on people of color and other disenfranchised groups.

Petitions Unavailable to Non-English Speakers

Those who do not speak English are excluded from determining what goes on the ballot simply because initiative petitions are available in English only.

The Federal Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 outlawed discrimination in voting with a series of provisions designed to ensure that all eligible citizens can exercise their right to vote free from intimidation or discrimination. Section 203 of the law requires counties with significant limited-English populations to provide elections materials in relevant languages. For California, this has meant that we provide materials, such as voter guides and sample ballots, in at least Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Tagalog. But this requirement does not currently extend to initiative petitions being circulated in hope of getting on the ballot.
According to Migration Policy Institute, California’s Limited English Proficient (LEP) population grew by 56 percent from 1990 to 2010, to roughly 6.9 million. About 47 percent of California’s naturalized citizens do not speak English very well. It is unacceptable, therefore, that a majority minority state like California does nothing to proactively integrate these voters into our direct democracy.

The Greenlining Institute has sponsored legislation (SB 1233), which is being authored by Senator Alex Padilla (D-San Fernando Valley), to make initiative petitions language accessible.

Big Money’s Great Influence Over Initiatives

Californians are clearly frustrated by the influence of big money on the initiative process. It can cost proponents upwards of $2 million to qualify a measure for the ballot and several more millions to run a successful campaign afterwards. Consequently, groups with low and moderate means cannot run effective proactive campaigns and often end up on the defensive side of issues. While we cannot legally limit the amount of money spent on ballot initiatives, we can keep wealthy interests accountable by making information about top funders more readily available.

In our survey, 85 percent of registered voters said it is important to know who is funding initiative campaigns—both for and against measures—when making decisions; and 78 percent wanted that information presented to them in the California voter guide. Fifty-nine percent also said that they would actually be less likely to vote for a legislator who opposed legislation, such as The California Disclose Act (AB 1648), that would improve disclosure of top donors on political campaign advertisements.

Process and Language Defy Comprehension

Our survey found that 30 percent of California voters mistakenly think that they have to vote on all propositions listed on a ballot to make it valid. Disturbingly, this incorrect belief is held by 42 percent of black and 53 percent of Latino voters.

When undecided about how to vote on a ballot measure, 44 percent of California voters said they “make the best decision they can.” As one participant in our listening tour said, “I will look at the fiscal if I’m not sure. If it is going to cost money, I vote no. The state doesn’t have any money.” But the fiscal estimate alone does not give voters the whole picture. Currently, the state voter guide does not provide an analysis of a proposition’s social impacts—its effects on things like the poverty and unemployment rate and the environment. We found, however, that a strong majority (60 to 70 percent) of California voters would like to have information about a proposal’s social impacts.

Also, many community members described the current voter guide language as “complex,” “confusing” and “legalese,” and expressed a need for simplifying the language to be consistent with the reading levels of the average California adult.

The Future of the Ballot Initiative System

Ultimately, initiative reform is about enhancing the ordinary citizen’s access to and use of the initiative process while at the same time, protecting vulnerable groups from being attacked by the initiative process.

If we want an initiative system that: (a) enables California’s new majority to participate, (b) protects against attacks on civil rights, and (c) allows people to hold their government and wealthy special interests accountable, we have to include people of color in the discussion.

There is no quick fix to the complex problems we face in trying to reform the initiative process, but the recommendations outlined here would be a good place to start. Some reforms can be enacted by the legislature and may get approval relatively easily but the more extensive and complex reforms may very well require their own ballot initiatives.

Endnotes

Race, Poverty and the Environment (RP&E) is Urban Habitat’s national journal of social and environmental justice, founded in 1990.

For over two decades we have covered how low-income people and communities of color are organizing to win equality and justice. Multiracial, multi-issue organizations capable of uniting constituencies for social justice action have never been more critical. RP&E is a longtime and crucial connection point for advocacy groups, regionally and nationally.

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In 2010, RP&E forged print-web-radio collaborations with local and national radio outlets with production facilities in the Bay Area. Radio RP&E features in depth interviews and speeches from the movement for racial, economic, and gender justice.

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