



The Rise of ‘New Values Voters’

How 2012 Election Victories Chart a Values Landscape in 2013 and Beyond

Catherine Woodiwiss January 2013

Heading into the 2012 election season, few could have predicted that a group of nuns, a network of black churches, and a first-time networkwide voter-mobilization campaign would significantly shape the electoral terrain. But these groups were responsible for significant counternarrative victories for progressive values in 2012.

A faith-based organizing network quietly built resistance to a Taxpayer Bill of Rights-like amendment being pushed by conservatives in Florida, successfully reversing public opinion and protecting public services for the state.¹ African American congregations in Ohio and Florida rejected voter-intimidation efforts and instead cast their ballots in record numbers.² And a group of nuns on a bus reoriented the focus of election-season headlines from debates over the federal deficit to a national discussion around economic justice.³

These efforts promoted the belief that we are our brother’s and sister’s keepers. Each success demonstrated that, at a minimum, we, the people, demand fairness, equality, protection, and a voice—for ourselves and for our brothers and sisters. Most importantly, each win shed light on the durability of these values—values that are holding strong across the nation in a time of financial, social, demographic, religious, and political uncertainty.

These efforts also turned expectations of religious engagement in election-season policy on its head. Rather than hierarchical, dogmatic, and, at times, clearly partisan efforts by conservative faith groups this past year—case in point: the sustained outcry over the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ contraception provision⁴—these were grassroots movements and were keyed to local concerns and shared experiences.

In each case, these faith-based community efforts appeared at first to be uphill battles but grew rapidly in import and influence, proving that support for progressive values is deeply rooted and widespread—and, critically, it is a resource that progressives can draw upon for years to come. Faith groups helped progressives regain political ground and

solidified the notion of the “new values voters.”⁵ As we head into 2013—with debates over gun control, immigration reform, the debt ceiling, climate change, and more—progressive advocates should take heart in the victories of 2012. These wins serve as signposts for an expanded understanding of “values voters,” as well as our national spirit.

All politics is local: Organizing neighbors to protect social services

It was widely acknowledged that the economy was the top concern for voters in 2012.⁶ Conservatives denounced raising tax rates⁷ for the wealthy, while many others caricatured those who rely on public services as lazy⁸ and spoiled.⁹ So one would be hard-pressed to expect propositions to increase spending for social services and public education could find widespread support. But that’s what happened. And People Improving Communities through Organizing, or PICO, a faith-based community-organizing network, proved instrumental in protecting social services in several states.

The organization’s state-level workers understand that a surefire way to influence policy is to demonstrate muscle in the voting booth. To that end, People Improving Communities through Organizing, one of the largest faith- and community-based efforts in the United States, launched its first multistate voter-mobilization campaign, dubbed the Land of Opportunity.¹⁰ Working with a diverse coalition of faith, labor, and civil rights groups, it reached millions of registered and first-time voters.

The group’s mobilizing efforts focus on working-class communities, youth, and communities of color—groups that have historically been “written off” by many major political actors, including big banks and entrenched politicians. People Improving Communities through Organizing trains, mobilizes, and empowers these communities to fight for their interests on targeted political issues. With its help, communities have built strong neighborhood networks to educate and train neighbors, family, and friends to vote. Last year saw fruitful outcomes of these efforts in multiple states.

California: Voters raise taxes to preserve social services

In California, a state with high income inequality that has struggled to raise revenue, People Improving Communities through Organizing mobilized clergy and communities to pass Proposition 30,¹¹ an initiative to increase revenue by temporarily raising sales taxes by one-quarter of a cent for four years and increasing income taxes on those making more than \$250,000 a year for seven years.¹² These increases will help the state avoid deep cuts to public schools and hikes in college tuition; will restore cuts made to certain health care and child care programs; and will guarantee funding to local counties for public safety.

According to Corey Timson, director of PICO California, passing Prop 30 was a top priority for faith-based, labor, and civil rights groups in California—not only for its practical impact but also for its moral dimensions.¹³ Timson notes that for years, PICO California has held to the importance of community over rugged individualism; an economy that works for all, not just a few; and a government that protects and provides for the common good. Proposition 30, says Timson, “became the vehicle to promote opportunity and provide for a fuller understanding of what allows for opportunity to be created ... Here, clergy [and community leaders] feel this motivation very viscerally.” As the economic and demographic shifts occurring in California begin to “roll across the country,” Timson says efforts such as Prop 30 may well become a “proving ground” for values.¹⁴

Thanks in significant part to PICO California’s massive get-out-the-vote effort—including 6,350 youth volunteers and a campaign targeting more than 252,000 infrequent voters California voters approved Prop 30 by an 8-point margin, 54 percent to 46 percent.¹⁵

Florida: Reversing public opinion and rejecting a Taxpayer Bill of Rights

People Improving Communities through Organizing’s success was not limited to California. PICO United Florida led the No On 3 campaign,¹⁶ which successfully defeated a conservative-backed effort to set a constitutional limit on revenue collection and spending. Alongside a coalition that included the League of Women Voters, the Florida Parent Teacher Association, the Florida AARP, Florida New Majority, SEIU, National Council of La Raza, and other groups, PICO United Florida worked to reject Amendment 3, a Taxpayer Bill of Rights-like constitutional amendment¹⁷ that threatened to gut funding for the state’s social services and public education in the name of controlling spending.

Similar efforts have been defeated in 20 state legislatures since 1992, and the Center for Budget Priorities has outlined how over time, similar amendments would “lead to increasingly deep cuts in the amount of revenue to meet existing and emerging needs. ... in short, adoption of this measure would undermine Florida’s ability to make long-term investments in areas that are key to economic prosperity.”¹⁸ Yet for months before the election, internal polling by People Improving Communities through Organizing and its affiliates indicated that the bill enjoyed popular support.¹⁹

The group and its allies, however, rejected the “logic” of Florida’s Amendment 3 by promoting the importance of supporting families, education, and public services. It took pains to articulate that passing Amendment 3 and its mandated spending ceiling would decimate Florida’s public education and social services.²⁰

People Improving Communities through Organizing’s dedicated, data-driven effort reaching more than 650,000 undecided voters paid off when Amendment 3 was rejected by voters 58 percent to 42 percent.²¹

According to Rev. Errol Thompson, a clergy leader with the No On 3 campaign, “This victory for Florida families shows that voters support investments in our children and communities, not more cuts to the things that matter most.”²²

Lessons from the states

The message in these successful campaigns is clear: Being a good neighbor means supporting your community in order to protect and strengthen the public good.

Timson, with California’s Prop 30 campaign, calls the measure’s passage “a testament to the power of people voting their values and, in the process, changing the course of our state ... These voters—people of faith, the working class, youth, communities of color—along with labor partners, are engaged and are forming a powerful constituency.”²³

It is a constituency that is highly trained. Thanks to the Prop 30 and No On 3 campaigns, People Improving Communities through Organizing and its affiliates in California and Florida, among other states, have vastly expanded their potential for impact through new volunteers, smart data-driven campaigns, and the use of technology, including social media. “We now have a whole new group of people that were moved by their faith to help us defeat Amendment 3 and are ready for the next fight,” says Peter Phillips, executive director of PICO United Florida. “Whether it’s foreclosure prevention, immigrants’ rights, voting rights, or federal budget issues, faith voters are ready for the next big challenge.”²⁴

There will be many challenges and fights ahead. According to Pastor Marcel Davis with the No On 3 campaign, “Unlike a political campaign, our work as people of faith organizing for justice doesn’t end on election night ... We’ll be at it again tomorrow, because what fuels us is an overflowing passion for loving God’s people and seeking God’s righteousness. And that’s a year-round task.”²⁵

Groups such as People Improving Communities through Organizing make sure that the voices of people who too often are discounted or are left on the margins are being heard at the voting booth. By doing so, the organization’s network and other similar groups highlight an enduring American value: the belief that everyone should have the opportunity to contribute her or his fair share toward creating a more just and prosperous nation for all.

Congregations for the community: Mobilizing ‘souls to the polls’

A traditional voting day among black churches is the Sunday before each Election Day, dubbed “Souls to the Polls” day.²⁶ At church, pastors remind congregants to exercise their hard-won freedom to vote, and on the Sunday before Election Day, parishioners

leave the service and head together to the voting booths. This act of civic engagement—in the same tradition as church-run voter registration drives after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965—is deliberately nonpartisan. Even so, in 2008 nearly 57 percent of early voting in Florida on “Souls to the Polls” Sunday came from African American or Latino communities voting overwhelmingly for then-presidential candidate Barack Obama.²⁷

So in 2012, when 34 states²⁸ introduced legislation to shorten early voting periods and exclude this critical voting day in key swing states—including Florida and Ohio—these efforts were seen by some communities of color as a direct attempt to disenfranchise them and discourage their churches from mobilizing.²⁹

Concerns about voter suppression and intimidation in 2012 were already high, as states from Maine to Texas threatened stringent voter ID laws³⁰ that would make it difficult for college students, the elderly, and communities of color to vote. Equally disturbing, voter-intimidation billboards³¹ cropped up in African American and Latino neighborhoods in Ohio. Taken together, a number of experts speculated that these suppression efforts might mean depressed Election Day turnout from communities of color.³²

Those predictions were wrong. In response to perceived threats to their vote, faith groups and African American and Latino congregations stepped up their “Souls to the Polls” efforts. Pastors used their houses of worship as forums for public engagement and urged their congregations to speak up through their ballots. Nationwide, churches held weekend voter-education rallies. In Florida, faith-based groups such as the Conference of National Black Churches, the African American Council of Christian Clergy, and the Federation of Congregations United to Serve arranged vans and buses to transport people to the polls and held rallies and public events in the days leading up to the early voting period.³³

For some, such as Rev. R.L. Gundy, state president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, exercising the right to vote was a matter of moral urgency. He said that, “Our ancestors paid a dear price to have a right to vote, and we don’t take it for granted.” Before a crowd preparing to vote early in Florida, Gundy prayed: “Yet the enemy does all it can to disenfranchise us. God, go with us into these polls and every poll around the country.”³⁴

For others, it was a matter of family and civic engagement. Pastor Thomas Eppinger, leader of a church in Cleveland, urged on his congregants saying that, “Today is a historic day, ‘souls to the polls’ day. So get down to the polls and vote. Our folks died to get us the right to vote, so go out and use it.” He later elaborated, “It’s our way of teaching our young people that you can’t just sit on the sidelines criticizing your leaders if you don’t vote.”³⁵

Ultimately, more than half a million people³⁶ cast early votes in Florida over the weekend before Election Day 2012, far out-distancing the 17,000 early votes cast in 2008. In

Ohio nearly 230 churches joined the “Souls to the Polls” effort across the state.³⁷ In both cases turnout expectations were far exceeded. In Ohio, for instance, African American voters make up just 12 percent of the eligible electorate but accounted for 15 percent of all votes cast³⁸—outpacing the already-high proportional turnout for African Americans nationwide in 2012.³⁹

The success of the 2012 “Souls to the Polls” effort is a clear demonstration that when basic rights and standards of justice are threatened, communities will mobilize. Congregations used their voices and organizing talents to repudiate the efforts to deny their civil rights. Stories from the voting lines of thousands of people waiting patiently in the cold singing, praying, and sharing pizza paint a picture of voters moved by a sense of justice, fairness, and pride in the country.⁴⁰

What’s more, the campaign’s success indicates the critical space that churches and their congregations occupy in many communities, particularly those of color, serving as hubs for education and political action. In 2012, as they have done for decades, houses of worship preached hope and civic engagement and moved voters and votes in the process.

‘Nuns on the Bus’: Taking a nation’s values pulse

The successes noted above demonstrate the power of state-level organizing around progressive values. But the story of the Nuns on the Bus painted a broader picture of our nation—showing us that we do share a common vision of who we are as Americans.

In late 2011 Occupy Wall Street and talk of the so-called 99 percent dominated the news. By early 2012, however, the “99 percent effect”⁴¹ had faded from dominating headlines to sharing them with the public debate over growth, curbing the deficit, and cutting federal spending.

No one would have predicted, then, that the summer’s news would feature a busload of nuns travelling through nine states and 29 cities⁴² to visit faith-based charities—charities that would be devastated by Rep. Paul Ryan’s (R-WI) proposed draconian budget cuts to Medicaid, food stamps, and more.⁴³ Nor could anyone have imagined that these nuns would be met in the cities and towns they visited by large supportive crowds cheering and waving signs.⁴⁴

Similar to these Catholic sisters, many Americans were offended by the harsh rhetoric and extreme individualistic philosophy behind Rep. Ryan’s GOP-passed budget. His attempt to justify his budget by tying it to Catholic social teachings struck many Catholics as undeniably wrong. The bus-touring nuns exemplified a more authentic view of Catholic social teaching—one centered on shared responsibility, human dignity, and the idea that we are all in this together.

Nuns on the Bus—an effort of Network, the Catholic social justice lobby—visited local faith-based charities to highlight the crucial work of local service providers and show how these providers, many of them also Catholic, would be decimated by the cuts proposed in the Ryan budget.⁴⁵ The nuns also held rallies at soup kitchens and congressional offices across the country.⁴⁶

By the end of the bus tour, the nuns' bold and explicitly faith-rooted denouncement of the Ryan budget captured the national imagination and garnered enthusiastic support from secular and faithful Americans. Seventy-five members of Congress shared messages of gratitude, and the nuns' return to the District of Columbia was met by a diverse and notably young crowd, indicating a hunger for more similarly values-based organizing.⁴⁷ Perhaps no one was more surprised by this success than Sister Campbell, executive director of Network and the organizer of the bus tour.

“[The issue] is totally alive,” said Campbell in an *Esquire* September 2012 interview. “I think religious women have been doing that all this time, but it's just that we've been doing it on the margins of society and nobody saw it. Now is the chance to lift it up.”⁴⁸

The original bus tour sparked several more issue-raising bus treks through the fall in New York, Ohio, and Virginia, and a Nuns on the Ferry trip to Staten Island in September.⁴⁹

The nuns' cry for a moral—in their words “faithful”⁵⁰—budget infused the national discussion with moral authority and changed the way faith and politics were discussed in the national media. Moreover, by echoing Occupy Wall Street's public discontent over economic inequality, the nuns, using the national stage, proved that for ordinary Americans, “an economy that works for all of us”—far from a flash-in-the-pan notion⁵¹—is a deeply shared national value.

Signposts for 2013

People Improving Communities through Organizing workers in California, “Souls to the Polls” campaigners in Florida, and the Nuns on the Bus nationwide tour promoted values of economic justice, support for the poor, and care for one's neighbor to fight extreme, individualistic, “you're on your own” economic and social policies. In each case, these efforts tapped into closely held progressive values shared among a large and growing number of faithful, secular, and unaffiliated voters.

The election results in November were a sign that faith aligned with progressive values is alive and well in the public square. Likewise, the results underscore the rejection of religious and political extremism.

“When you see voting as an expression of your deepest values—as many people of faith do—then a long line isn’t going to dissuade you,” said Rev. Thompson of PICO United Florida.⁵²

Last November, we saw what this expanding coalition of people of shared values—these “new values voters”—can do when public education, social services, voting rights, and economic justice are on the line. What remains to be seen is what these coalitions will do to address upcoming issues such as gun control, immigration reform, climate change, and the federal budget. With organizers such as those above leading the way, 2013 promises to be a year where values of fairness, equality, and protection of the vulnerable will carry us all forward together.

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Endnotes

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