

Push Back on Prop 8

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"¡Sí, Se Puede! ¡Sí, Se Puede!" roared the crowd of 12,000 protesting passage of Proposition 8 outside Los Angeles City Hall on November 15. Their chants followed Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's declaration, "In the eyes of the law and in the eyes of God, Thou Shalt Not Discriminate!"

California's LGBT community has risen up in anger following homophobic onslaughts before, most notably in 1991, when 50,000 people took to the streets of LA following Governor Pete Wilson's veto of a simple job-equity bill. But this time is different; the right's victory on Prop 8 seems suddenly out of step with the zeitgeist. This is the new Obama era of progressive patriotism, and the homophobes who outgunned the No on 8 campaign seem like a throwback. Jon Stewart, as he parried recently with Bill O'Reilly, named gay marriage as the next step on America's long and jagged journey to justice. Could it be that gay marriage, widely blamed for John Kerry's loss four years ago, is the next winning issue on this country's agenda for change?

The Yes on 8 forces ran a brilliant campaign. Along with their usual lies to frighten people about children and religion, they beat us at our own game. The right built a strong multiracial religious coalition that reached African-American and Latino voters across the state, the majority of whom supported Prop 8.

I watched their coming victory with a sinking heart. Thirty years ago, I worked tirelessly against Prop 6 (the Briggs initiative to fire gay teachers), and in 1986 I was Southern California campaign coordinator for No on Prop 64 (the LaRouche initiative to quarantine people living with HIV/AIDS). But this year I poured my political passions into the Obama campaign, working 24/7 to get him elected president. I was based in the main LA office, then in Nevada, where I helped coordinate Latino and African-American volunteers doing voter-to-voter registration and GOTV. Our plan worked magnificently: the Silver State turned deep blue, by 12 percentage points. Working side by side with an amazing team--mostly women, mostly African-American and Latina--I caught the early warning signs on Prop 8. When Yes on 8 signs began sprouting up on her neighbors' lawns in early October, one African-American Obama volunteer, Angie Rodriguez, asked me, "Where are the No on 8 folks? My neighborhood has been visited by the Yes people twice already."

Perhaps more telling was when Mitchell Schwartz, Obama's California director, asked me in mid-October, "Why aren't Barack's own words opposing Prop 8 plastered all over? This was the only proposition he took a stand on, and people need to know it!" When I passed the question on to a friend on No on 8's executive committee, he explained that they had decided that Obama's position was too confusing, because he opposes gay marriage but came out against Prop 8. But that critical decision to set aside Obama's position (until the very end, after a campaign shake-up) allowed the Yes on 8 people to step into the void and put out deceptive fliers and robocalls saying Obama supported Prop 8. If No on 8 had acted early and forcefully, telling Obama's true position, it could have made the difference.

There were other No on 8 campaign mistakes. On GOTV weekend, I walked the streets of Henderson, Nevada, with my friend Phill Wilson, who runs LA's Black AIDS Institute. I was

shocked to learn that Phill had never been called by the No on 8 campaign. Nobody in the LA gay community knows better than Phill which African-American church leaders can be moved on gay issues; it's been his life's work for more than two decades. And the powerful LA labor movement, with its sway in the Latino community, was not engaged. A small gay Latino group, Honor PAC, and some independent Latina activists had to take over the East LA No on 8 office in the last weeks. Their heroic work kept the Latino yes vote lower than many had predicted. Another positive story: API Equality, a vigorous grassroots effort in Asian/Pacific Islander communities begun three years ago, also autonomous from the official No on 8 campaign, helped persuade 51 percent of APIs to vote against Prop 8.

In Gus Van Sant's must-see new movie about assassinated San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk, there's a scene on election night 1978, when the Briggs initiative went down. Harvey gets a call from Los Angeles County--"We've beat it by 65 percent here!"--and the celebration begins. You can't win on a gay issue in California without winning LA County. In 1978 that meant a savvy, LA-based campaign that delivered the Bradley coalition of white liberals and south-side African-Americans. These days it means engaging real support from our allies in labor--canvassing and phone-banking and not just fundraising. It means going door to door in South and East LA. The No on 8 campaign, with its power center in San Francisco, did neither, forgetting what Milk knew thirty years ago.

But the future looks brighter. Marching in that Saturday protest alongside LGBT community members were thousands of straight supporters. Among them were my new friends from the Obama campaign, now passionate allies in the emerging coalition to undo Prop 8. I didn't have to ask them to come. "I was so busy working for Barack's victory, I forgot to organize my family, but I'm here now, for as long as you need me," said Alma Marquez, the Obama field staffer responsible for statewide Latino outreach, with tears of regret. Alida Garcia-Okoebar, a sister Obama volunteer, told me, "We're all fired up and ready to go! Now we know our next campaign!" Raul Moreno, another Obama campaign friend, told me to call him when we get to work reversing Prop 8: "Sister, you got next!"

If the courts fail to overturn Prop 8, the strategy will likely be to put a hard-to-win pro-gay marriage ballot measure before the people of California in two or four years. In this new era of hope and change, and given the passionate chorus of diverse voices that have chimed in since November 4, I have absolutely no doubt that the rally cries of "¡Sí, se puede!" on marriage equality herald victory next time.

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