



HOW WE LOST THE VOTE BUT WON THE DAY

The Story of the 2013 Portland Pro-Fluoride Campaign



NORTHWEST HEALTH
FOUNDATION



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT builds democracy through shared solutions to public challenges. In the political sphere, civic engagement ranges from conversations about local issues with neighbors and elected officials; attending and testifying at hearings and government meetings; participating in voter education and mobilization efforts; and running for office. For communities facing historical discrimination and lack of representation, vigorous and sustained civic engagement is particularly vital.

A lack of capacity, not a shortage of interest, often limits community-based organizations' engagement in civic and democratic processes. Supporters of a vigorous, equitable democracy know that sustaining civic engagement capacity is a marathon, never a sprint. For that reason, it requires us to ask questions that are different from those used to assess the success of most political campaigns: What capacity was built, and how will it be sustained? What leadership was developed? Has knowledge been gained? And, finally: Who has found their power, and how?

BUILDING CAPACITY for civic engagement was a key element of the 2013 campaign to improve the oral health of children in Portland, Oregon through fluoridation of the city's drinking water.

As the campaign shifted from city council to the ballot, Northwest Health Foundation (NWHF) funded the voter education and mobilization work of eight community-based organizations (CBOs) serving communities of color and immigrant communities.



“Certainly oral health and children’s health are forefront in our priorities and are a direct benefit to the lifelong health of all Oregonians. Equally as important was the opportunity to help build the capacity of the communities, to build their voice, and to participate in a civic conversation.”

- Nichole June Maher, NWHF President & CEO

In this document, you’ll find some of our campaign and capacity-building experiences, issues and lessons learned. Our hope, in sharing these with community-based organizations, their allies, funders and advisors, is to encourage and assist future efforts to expand and invigorate civic engagement capacity in communities across the region.



TOOTH DECAY IS ONE OF AMERICA’S MOST CHALLENGING — AND PREVENTABLE — UNMET PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS. IT’S A BURDEN THAT WEIGHS HEAVILY ON THE YOUNG, ESPECIALLY IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR AND FROM FAMILIES WITH LIMITED INCOMES OR DISABILITIES.

After years of community education and engagement on the widespread problem of tooth decay, a broad, diverse group of organizations, allies, funders and advisors launched a campaign to fluoridate the water supply of Portland, Oregon, one of the nation’s largest cities without fluoridated drinking water.

Advocates focused their efforts on the Portland City Council who voted unanimously to fluoridate. However, opponents of water fluoridation successfully referred the issue to the ballot, with Portland City Council choosing the election date. The advocates launched the Healthy Kids Healthy Portland coalition (along with a political action committee, or PAC) in January 2013 to drive voter passage of Measure 26-151, on the ballot for the May 20, 2013 election. **The 12-week campaign included two elements that have transformed “politics as usual” in the Portland metro region.**

The first was direct funding of voter engagement and turnout activities for community-based advocacy and service groups serving communities of color and immigrant communities. This was the first time, in Portland’s history, that a political campaign funded

civic capacity building efforts by community-based organizations. Northwest Health Foundation financed the capacity development funding via a contribution to the campaign's PAC, which contracted with and distributed the funds via contract payments (initially \$20,000 per organization), and later with direct grants to eight CBOs:

- 🏠 Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon
- 🏠 Center for Intercultural Organizing
- 🏠 Coalition of Communities of Color
- 🏠 Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization
- 🏠 Latino Network
- 🏠 Native American Youth and Family Center
- 🏠 Oregon Latino Health Coalition
- 🏠 Urban League of Portland





“It was important [for NWHF] to build the capacity of the community to run and be part of political campaigns. That desire, and that outcome, allowed us to invest at a level that would make a difference.”

- Nichole June Maher, NWHF President & CEO



OREGON VOICE

The pro-fluoride campaign's second innovation was giving the CBOs access to the technology, data analysis and expertise offered through Oregon Voice (OV), a statewide nonprofit committed to increasing the political clout of underrepresented groups. OV's ultimate goal is to prioritize a data-driven approach, support year-round civic engagement and facilitate a culture of collaboration.

Oregon Voice offered the campaign formidable capacity-building tools, including access to the Voter Activation Network, or VAN, which contains an array of data about every voter in the state, including voting history and information gathered from canvassing and other means.

"We never know how you vote," explained OV Executive Director Helena Huang, "but we do know when you vote—and what magazines you might read."

Access to VAN makes it possible for campaign staff to correctly identify the race and nationality of their constituents. Six of the eight organizations matched their membership lists to VAN, boosting identification of voters of color for future campaigns.

Matt Morton, CEO of the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA) spoke to OV's role. "The contribution they made was significant," he said. "We had the best vetted [membership] list of any of our partners." In addition, two CBOs (NAYA and Latino Network) joined OV as table members with year-round access to OV's resources.

THE CAMPAIGN OUTCOMES—SHORT AND LONG-TERM—WERE IMPRESSIVE. THE CBOS' COLLECTIVE EFFORTS DELIVERED:

- ✔ More quantifiable, targeted and direct voter contact with members of communities of color than any other election in Oregon's history—including 1,322 conversations in six languages (other than English);
- ✔ Community-specific outreach, including (but not limited to) multi-lingual community forums, ballot parties, event outreach, one-on-one meetings, educational trainings and a limited amount of door-to-door canvassing (including some with bilingual organizers);
- ✔ A wide array of innovative, culturally-focused voter outreach strategies and campaign materials, used alongside traditional campaign outreach strategies;
- ✔ The addition of 1,000+ voters of color (previously misidentified as white) to the Voter Activation Network;
- ✔ Increased political campaign skills and experience among community-based organizations;
- ✔ Development, creation and distribution of community-specific campaign mailers, web content, email blasts, social media posts and related materials; and
- ✔ A foundation of shared experience, language and knowledge for future political campaigns.

ELECTION RESULTS

Although it is not possible to conclusively link the campaign's results to the voter turnout (and the majority of Portland's voters did not support the measure), voters of color produced a larger voter share in the 2013 special election than in the previous general election, an indication of increased civic engagement.

7.3%

of voters in the 2012 general election were people of color.



10.2%

of voters in the 2013 special election were people of color.



WHAT WERE THE LESSONS LEARNED?

This campaign showed it is possible and feasible to both create a credible political campaign and effectively assist CBOs in building civic engagement expertise and capacity. Here are some of the key takeaways from Portland's pro-fluoride campaign:

BUILD THE CAMPAIGN ON A FOUNDATION OF CIVIC CAPACITY BUILDING, AND WORK WITH CAMPAIGN STRATEGISTS AND CONSULTANTS WHO WILL ADVANCE THAT GOAL.

Political campaigns are usually built around political consultants, whose primary goal is winning, not civic engagement capacity building. They consider strict tracking of metrics (e.g., phone calls made, doors knocked) and top-down control as paramount. Their assumptions, opinions or strategies are not often challenged.

Who campaign consultants are shapes their message, and most professional political consultants, according to recent research, are white (95.5%), college-educated (90%) and male (82%).



"I think mainstream campaigns have no idea how to incorporate communities of color fully into electoral campaigns. That's not what they do; that's not been their experience."

- Helena Huang, Oregon Voice ED

For NWHF, a key goal of funding the civic engagement efforts of CBOs was ending political business-as-usual.



“We were really overt in our desire to disrupt that power balance and to try something a little different.”

- Suk Rhee, NWHF VP, Strategy & Community Partnership

The political and media consultants and campaign staff for the Healthy Kids Healthy Portland campaign had a similar profile (although with a somewhat better gender balance). Most had not worked in a campaign in which people of color were in positions of parity, much less leadership.

Explained NWHF President Nichole June Maher, “You had liberal progressive folks who were there for the right reason and believed that they’re a wonderful ally to communities of color—and that they knew best. It’s very hard, when you’re bringing all that good will and good intent and long hours to a campaign, to then have someone say, ‘Actually, you’re doing this in a biased way, and you’re not being that effective with my community.’”

Inserting community-based organizations as contractors after the campaign structure and roles were already in place, however, meant the CBOs—many of which were in their first political campaign—were added to an already existing and inflexible structure in which they had little influence, status or control.

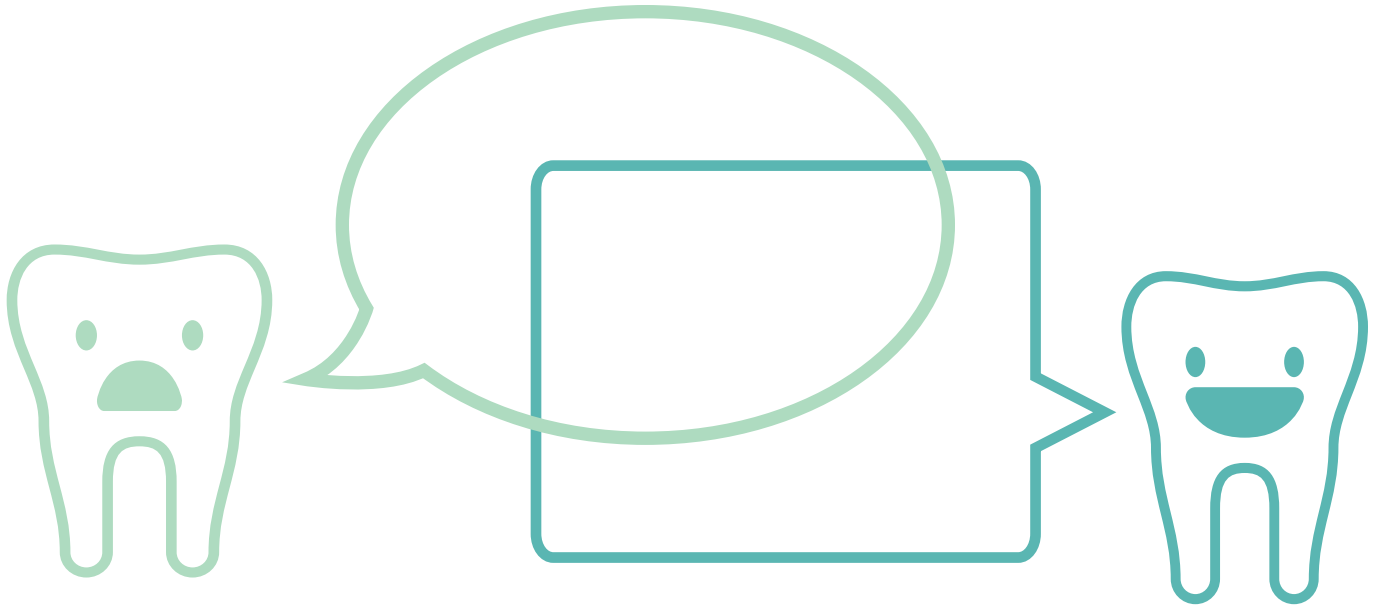
Conflicts between campaign staff and consultants and the CBOs were present from the beginning. The CBOs' staff members saw themselves as partners bringing valuable resources to the campaign and assumed campaign staff would view and treat them as peers. Instead, CBOs reported feeling that the campaign staff thought of them as passive pools of political labor. The campaign staff thought the CBOs failed to deliver on promises for campaign volunteers to provide needed infrastructure.

"It wasn't as if they saw us as experts in our niche areas or in our communities," said Oscar Arana, NAYA's Director of Strategic Development & Communications. "They kind of saw us as, 'Well, we paid you this money, so why aren't you door-knocking [with our campaign lists]?'"

CBOs felt their role was best suited to engage *their* members on the issue, not to supply volunteers for a more traditional campaign

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS WITH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AS A PRIORITY MAY WANT TO:

1. Ensure that each role and all assumptions are realistic, clearly stated and acceptable to all parties before the campaign's launch.
2. Engage political operatives who will commit to your goal of organizational capacity building, especially those who can demonstrate effective and long-term relationships with similar organizations.



strategy. Unfortunately, neither the memorandums of understanding that the CBOs signed, nor the structure of the political campaign, asserted such parity. In addition, the short campaign window limited the time available to retool the campaign structure.

WHEN IT COMES TO MESSAGING, ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL.

The campaign’s original messaging focused on fluoride’s safety and effectiveness, using endorsements from medical authorities. The polling suggested these messages resonated with older, white voters whose turnout is traditionally high.

Unfortunately, it was not informed by, nor did it address the many and varied concerns about oral health and fluoridation expressed in Portland’s immigrant communities and communities of color, Huang and others recalled. **“We had so many different constituents that had different relationships with fluoride. For some African Americans, it was more about whether the govern-**

ment can be trusted. In our Latino community it was over-fluoridation of their water in Mexico,” Huang remembered.

Disagreements over message strategy slowed progress in investing in, creating and disseminating culturally-relevant materials.

“In the end, I think we actually got pretty good at figuring out what were the right messages, so we really learned a lot...[But] by the time we got the messaging for each of our communities—and we created beautiful materials—it was a week before the election,” Huang recalled. “I looked around and there were stacks of gorgeous postcards and one-pagers for our culturally-specific communities that I knew would never get to the people they were designed to get to because we didn’t have the capacity, and because we didn’t have enough time.”

Another example: One of the most effective and compelling campaign videos contained facts and comments refuting several of the more common assertions from fluoride opponents. It includ-



ed several leaders of the community-based service and advocacy groups, such as the executive directors of APANO and Latino Network. The campaign posted that video on YouTube just two days before Election Day. It received less than 100 views.

START EARLY

Advocates and Portland City Council followed consultants' advice in putting the issue on the primary ballot instead of the general election in November. So the ballot campaign lasted only 12 weeks. While that benefitted those wanting a fast campaign cycle, the extremely short timeline, exacerbated by role-confusion, hobbled the effectiveness of the civic capacity building efforts, and the campaign itself.

For example, the CBOs were chosen for the campaign after responding to a Request for Proposals. Review of the responses took valuable weeks out of the three-month campaign. Contrary to CBOs intent, the campaign leadership assumed it would have CBO volunteers and employees to "staff" the campaign, leaving the campaign without staff for several weeks.

APPROPRIATE AND EFFECTIVE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN STAFF MAY BE HARD TO FIND—AND AN ORGANIZATION'S CIVIC CAPACITY CAN SHRINK DURING OFF-CYCLES.

The CBOs mostly hired contractors or temporary employees to staff the bulk of their campaign efforts. (NAYA used existing staff.) Admittedly, they struggled to find experienced, multilingual cam-

campaign staff and/or staff of color, which chewed up precious campaign time.

There are very, very few freelance campaign contractors from communities of color and immigrant communities in Oregon. So out-of-state contractors need to be “brought up to speed” about a CBO’s culture and the community it serves to be effective in local campaigns. Identifying, selecting and educating them takes precious organizational and campaign time.

The CBOs’ reliance on contract workers meant, as well, that plenty of their campaign knowledge and capacity left once the campaign was over.

CBOs can be excellent sources of a diverse cadre of political operatives, but only if an organization and its funders truly value building and sustaining that work within CBOs. Before signing on to a campaign, a CBO needs to thoughtfully assess if it is willing and able to commit to the long arc necessary for the benefits of civic engagement to accrue and manifest beyond the campaign itself. Organizational leadership also needs to be willing to see the benefits of investing in its current staff and building its own civic engagement expertise. Funders need to know how they will sustain internal civic capacity building once the campaign is over.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER.

How we campaign is as important as the issues on which we campaign. Nowhere is that more important than maintaining and sustaining relationships—before, during and after the campaign.

Community-based groups and professional campaign staff, for example, need to think beyond the campaign, reminded Michael Alexander, former head of the Urban League of Portland.



"I'm always concerned when outsider campaigners or consultants come in with a win-at-all costs approach. They have an obligation to do no harm and to absolutely fight the inclination to view the capital, the credibility of these organizations, as collateral damage, because that's likely all we have."

- Michael Alexander, Former Urban League of Portland ED

Relationships built on respect are vital, particularly in communities too often ignored except at election times, said NAYA's Arana. "Campaigns need to invest in the CBOs' time and what they will be bringing in. If they're spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in advertising on TV, they can definitely invest more in communities that are typically underrepresented in voter turnout, and working with those community organizations to turn their communities out."

Those within an organization's community—and the organization itself—matter, as well. Be clear on your purpose, said NAYA's Morton. "You don't want to jump lightly into something like this. Be clear on what the benefits are and how they will be seen by those in your community." Based on his campaign experience, Arana noted, "You need to be willing to be challenged by community members and leaders who are not going to agree with you. Bring

opinion leaders together; build that coalition as big as possible so that it's one big voice, instead of one CBO or just a few people."

CAPACITY BUILDING IS A LONG-TERM PROCESS: ADJUST EXPECTATIONS ACCORDINGLY.

Although the oral health advocates did not find success at the ballot box, the benefits for the organizations involved were immense.

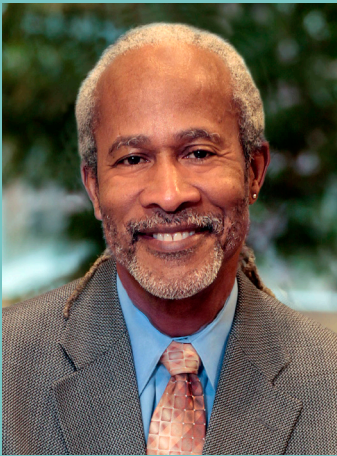


"A lot of people would see [the campaign's loss] as a failure. I wouldn't because of all of the growth [for NAYA]. It was the first initial step, and it needs to continue happening with more preparation, more planning... We definitely need to look into the future and strategize."

- Oscar Arana, NAYA Director of Strategic Development & Communications

Funders need to remember and value the long horizon of civic capacity building. "Foundations need to be patient and willing to make long term investments. It takes time to develop capacity within these organizations. We've been advocating for the community for decades, but in terms of voter turnout, getting the vote out, it's very new, especially when you're talking about immigrant and refugee communities, and for the Native American community as well."

BUILDING CIVIC CAPACITY FROM THE GROUND UP



The Urban League of Portland was one of the eight community-based groups funded for civic engagement during the Healthy Kids Healthy Portland campaign. Here, Michael Alexander (the League's former Executive Director and a member of NWHF's Board of Directors) summarizes some key campaign issues:

WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT? "Make sure you're committed, that you're all in. Health equity isn't an intellectual exercise; you have to be out there. We showed up. Two times a week, I stood at Burnside and

Broadway, holding a placard. We did our very best to have folks know that they had a vested interest in the outcome."

WHAT WERE YOUR BEST CAMPAIGN TOOLS? "We hired a contract campaign worker to join our advocacy team. We also used our normal outreach channels: canvassing, petition gathering, bringing our tables to places where there was a large amount of foot traffic. We also reached out electronically, to folks on our mailing list—and to faith communities, as we've done before. This wasn't a slick, Fifth Avenue ad campaign."

YOUR PRIMARY MESSAGE? "What is the cost of poor dental health to our children, to our community? What does the data tell us about the level of suffering that we can avert? For whom? That's what we tried to communicate."

MOST VALUED TAKE-AWAY? "Northwest Health Foundation and the other groups knew that the campaign might not be won this time, yet they took the battlefield anyway."

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