

THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

Sowing Seeds

JOHN ATLAS | OCTOBER 29, 2004

Last fall, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), a national community-organizing group, sent 39-year-old organizer Brian Kettenring to Florida to lead a project to register low-income voters for the November 2 election by mounting a referendum to raise the state's minimum wage to \$6.15 an hour and index it yearly to inflation. The grass-roots campaign may affect the outcome of the presidential race in the largest (27 electoral votes) battleground state. If John Kerry beats George W. Bush in Florida on Tuesday, ACORN's minimum-wage campaign will deserve much of the credit.

Before embarking on the campaign, ACORN, which has 160,000 dues-paying members in 28 states, commissioned a statewide poll by Celinda Lake that found overwhelming support for increasing the state's minimum wage, especially among low-income and minority residents.

According to a study conducted for Floridians For All by a University of Massachusetts economist, the state's low-income workers would get a \$443 million salary increase, which would have positive ripple effects throughout Florida.

Floridians for All -- a broad coalition of labor unions, community organizations, churches, senior-citizen groups, and others that ACORN initiated -- has registered 210,000 new voters, mostly low-income African Americans and Latinos in the state's largest urban areas. ACORN assumed that many poor Floridians, who might otherwise stay home on election day, would go to the polls to raise their wages and, once there, cast a vote in the presidential race as well.

Like the Christian right's effort to increase conservative and Republican turnout by putting measures against gay marriage on the ballot in swing states, ACORN's minimum-wage campaign was not directly tied to the Democratic Party or specific candidates. But the funding for this grass-roots effort (almost \$2 million) came from many of the same sources -- wealthy liberals, unions, and others -- that back Democrats.

The money was used to deploy a field staff of 40 organizers, 60 canvassers, and more than 2,000 volunteers to gather the signatures to put the measure on the ballot, register voters, and mobilize an election-day get-out-the-vote effort.

Floridians for All kicked off its campaign in August in 11 cities, anticipating that Florida's business community -- featuring a large restaurant and tourism industry, including Disney, that depends on low-wage employees -- would mount an expensive opposition effort. The next month, business leaders unveiled a plan to fight the amendment.

"We are not going to allow union bosses to come into the state of Florida and make decisions that are going to hamper the state of Florida without a fight," said Rick McAllister, the Florida Retail Federation's president and chief executive. On October 12, *The Tampa Tribune* blasted the minimum-wage amendment, echoing the business community's line that it is unnecessary because the majority of minimum-wage workers are under age 25, undereducated, and work only part time.

In October, the business groups launched television ads equating the minimum-wage initiative with Florida's recent hurricanes, calling the proposal a job killer. ACORN countered with an ad campaign of its own on cable TV, showing a working woman with grocery bags in one arm and one of her two children in the other, urging them to vote "Yes on 5" to help them meet the spiraling cost of "basic necessities like food, rent, and health care."

Not surprisingly, Florida's Republican Party has done everything it can to suppress voter turnout. *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert reported that the Florida Department of Law Enforcement sent in armed troopers into the homes of elderly voters in Orlando. Secretary of State Glenda Hood, a Republican, refused to accept voter-registration applications that don't include a check mark affirming citizenship -- even though a signature at the bottom of the application provides an oath of citizenship. Hood has also

ruled that provisional ballots cast in precincts other than the voter's own will be thrown out, a blow to ACORN's get-out-the-vote efforts.

In the first week of early voting, on Monday, October 18, a contingent of low-income Hispanic citizens, all members of Orlando ACORN, went to vote early, but there were no translators available for Spanish-speaking voters. The ACORN members had to wait up to two and a half hours to vote. There was little or no privacy as people voted. One ACORN member was told three times that he could go to jail if he gave any incorrect information. In Fort Lauderdale, an ACORN member was not allowed to vote because he was on the inactive-voter list -- even though the law clearly states that that can be rectified at the polling place.

The GOP and its business allies have reason to worry, though. An October poll conducted by the Lake polling group revealed strong support for the ballot initiative to raise Florida's minimum wage. Fully 81 percent of voters favor raising the minimum wage, while just 12 percent opposed raising it. The poll confirmed that the minimum-wage initiative would help increase participation. After hearing positive information about raising Florida's minimum wage, ACORN's key turnout targets -- African Americans, younger voters, and unmarried women -- became more interested in the election. For example, the poll found that nearly three-quarters of African Americans who had not voted in the past said that the minimum-wage issue was "very important" and would motivate them to vote.

Many unions, environmental groups, civil-rights organizations and others have been working in Florida for months to register new voters, but ACORN's strategy of mobilizing voters around the ballot initiative has won praise from many liberals. John Henley, the Florida campaign director for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), said, "Anyone who understands how campaigns work understands that ACORN did an amazing job."

Besides using the initiative campaign to expand voter turnout among the poor, ACORN is also using this effort to build and strengthen its own statewide organization, local chapters, and relationships with unions and other groups in order to create a permanent progressive infrastructure that can influence Florida politics for years to come.

"Our work won't end on November 3," said Kettenring. "We'll just be getting started."

John Atlas, president of the National Housing Institute and a recent Revson Fellow at Columbia University, is writing a book about ACORN. Peter Dreier teaches politics at Occidental College and is co-author of Place Matters: Metropolitica for the 21st Century and The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City.