

Grassroots vs. Big Oil

Measure P and the fight to ban fracking in Santa Barbara County, California

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ABSTRACT In 2014, volunteers in Santa Barbara County, California, collected over 20,000 signatures in three weeks to qualify an anti-fracking initiative for the November election. The initiative, Measure P, met over six million dollars in opposition from oil corporations. Despite mobilizing 1,000 volunteers, the proponents of the measure failed to garner enough votes for success. Drawing on 43 in-depth interviews and participant observation with environmental groups before, during, and after the campaign, this article examines the strengths and weaknesses of grassroots organizing behind Measure P. Organizers, especially during the signature drive, successfully garnered broad-based support in the southern part of the county, an affluent and tourist-dependent area with no onshore oil drilling. Messages based on water, made more salient by California's historic drought, resonated with many residents. Yet, after qualifying for the ballot, proponents of the campaign allied with the local Democratic Party, changing their organizing practices and forestalling bipartisan support. Outreach to Latinos in all areas of the county, and particularly in the northern part, where onshore drilling takes place, was limited. Finally, the overwhelming inequality between the financial power of proponents and the oil industry influenced the outcome. Based on this case, I argue that coalition building and groundwork to develop support within all sectors of communities, especially those most dependent on fossil fuel extraction, is critical to strengthening grassroots efforts that challenge the energy status quo.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Readers of this case will examine (1) grassroots organizing as a social response to unconventional energy extraction in the context of climate change, (2) ballot measures as a strategy for changing energy infrastructures in the United States, (3) tactics by grassroots mobilizations and fossil fuel corporations to secure their respective interests, and (4) how diversity in communities shapes engagement with anti-fracking campaigns.

CLASSROOM TESTED? NO

INTRODUCTION

Hydraulic fracturing, “fracking”, and other intensive techniques for extracting natural gas and oil are expanding across the United States and globe. In 2015, two thirds of natural gas [1] and half of oil production [2] in the United

States, the global leader in oil and gas production, came from hydraulically fractured wells. Fracking is associated with negative health effects [3], water contamination [4], and greenhouse gas emissions [5]. For these reasons, people have mobilized to oppose it. Four European countries have banned fracking. In Romania, protestors occupied a proposed fracking site until Chevron announced it would abandon operations there in 2015. In the United States, communities from Texas to Pennsylvania to Colorado (and many other places) have worked to ban or restrict the technique. They have fought for fracking moratoriums pending further study of risks, disclosure of the chemicals used in fracking, increased distance between fracking wells and homes or schools, and local, rather than state control, over fracking regulations.

This case examines resistance to fracking in Santa Barbara County, where Big Oil has had a foothold since

the late 1800s, when offshore oil drilling was pioneered in the Santa Barbara Channel. In 1969, the county was the site of the first major oil spill, a disaster that catalyzed the modern environmental movement. Since then, oil production has continued offshore, alongside predominantly affluent white beach communities in southern Santa Barbara County, and onshore, near predominantly Latino communities in northern Santa Barbara County. In 2014, Santa Barbara was the sixth-largest county oil producer in California, the nation's third-largest state oil producer [6].

In 2014, a small group of Santa Barbara residents came together to invigorate grassroots power to confront the oil industry. Meeting in late February 2014 at 350 Santa Barbara, a one-year old chapter of the international climate movement organization 350.org, members listened as Katie Davis and Becca Claassen, the women would come to lead the Yes on Measure P campaign, proposed the ballot measure idea. The other six activists in the room agreed to support the effort and on April 5, volunteers around the county began collecting signatures to support an initiative that would ban the use of intensive extraction techniques—fracking, acidization, and cyclic steam injection—in new onshore wells.¹ I was part of the campaign from the beginning and, in the next two years, conducted 43 in-depth interviews with local activists.

In the next seven months, people who had never been active before mobilized around the issue; longtime political strategists and heads of Santa Barbara's many environmental non-profit organizations weighed in; and Big Oil, perhaps surprised by the signature gathering success, poured money into an opposition campaign. The confluence of these factors, combined with the demographic and political context of the county, informed the strengths and weaknesses of the campaign and the threats and opportunities that activists confronted.

CASE EXAMINATION

Strengths and opportunities

One word—people power. Activists behind the effort to qualify Measure P for the ballot successfully mobilized a broad base of not only supporters, but people who would take time out of their day to stand on the corner, in front of the grocery store, and on campus to ask people to sign petitions. Throughout the campaign, over 1,000 volunteers

mobilized—more than any other anti-fracking effort in California to date. More than this quantity, however, was the quality of volunteers' engagement. Accustomed to organizing through consensus-based decisions and without formal leadership, the originators of the measure were committed to horizontal leadership. They formed seven teams throughout the county. Each had one or two "team captains" who were responsible for training signature gatherers, collecting signature packets, and tallying signatures totals. In North County, residents alarmed by the oil production around them collected thousands of signatures. An undergraduate student and I were co-captains for the area around the University of California, Santa Barbara. Each signature gatherer set personal goals and timelines. With this model, over 20,000 handwritten signatures in support of placing the initiative on the ballot were collected in three weeks. 16,000—3,000 more than needed—were deemed valid because they were from registered voters. Meeting this threshold prompted the County Board of Supervisors to place the initiative, which became Measure P, before voters in November 2014.

A sense of urgency contributed to the energy behind this early phase of the campaign. All core members had come together around the issue of climate change, many inspired by Bill McKibben's 2012 article "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math," which argued that fossil fuels must be kept in the ground to avoid warming the planet past two degrees Celsius [7]. Abysmal report-backs from members of the group who attended the 19th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in November 2013 contributed to the sense that *local* climate action was critical. Becca Claassen and Katie Davis felt so committed to securing a livable future that they put their careers on hold to be full-time volunteer organizers.

Another dimension of the urgency—why proponents pushed the initiative forward despite some more seasoned electoral campaigners' cautionary tales about low voter turnout in mid-term elections—was looming oil development. 350 Santa Barbara's first victory occurred in 2012 when the County Board of Supervisors required the local oil company Santa Maria Energy to purchase offsets for emissions above a 10,000 ton per year threshold on its 136-well expansion. 350 Santa Barbara felt that their push to reject the project completely, when other environmental groups were pushing for regulation, contributed to stricter emissions policies. On the heels of this victory, activists

1. Offshore oil production is not within the county's jurisdiction.

learned of an impending boom in unconventional oil production in the county, which sits atop the Monterey Shale formation. In the short term, according to the county, applications for 903 wells were permitted, proposed, or anticipated, 89% using high-intensity techniques. In the longer term, Santa Maria Energy disclosed plans for 7,700 new wells [8]. The emissions from these projects would eliminate progress the group had made so far through activism and lifestyle changes.

Alongside their passion and sense of urgency, the core group of activists behind the measure had the time—what scholars refer to as “biographical availability” [9]. They were retired, students, full-time activists, and people with flexible work schedules. These factors combined to nourish a grassroots campaign that became a formidable force.

Threats and weaknesses

Ultimately, activists’ passion and energy and even high voter approval ratings in summer of 2014 (57%) proved insufficient to pass Measure P. Entrenched oil industry power, insufficient groundwork before the campaign, and, in organizers’ views, the change in tactics brought on by collaboration with the Democratic Party shaped the outcome.

During Measure P, the oil industry continued its tradition of using money to shape politics (see [10]). A group called Californians for Energy Independence, whose donors included California-based Chevron (the state’s largest oil and gas producer), regional, and local oil companies, surprised proponents by funneling over six million dollars to opposition efforts. Measure P proponents raised over \$400,000—outspent more than 15 to one. This, combined with the fact that many contributions to proponents arrived late in the campaign, inhibited outreach efforts.

One effect of low funding for outreach was that some voters assumed that the opponents represented their interests. As Hazel Davalos, Organizing Director for Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), which supported the measure, explained, Latino voters in North County frequently heard—on local and large-scale media platforms, including Univision and Telemundo—No on P messaging in Spanish from North County Latino spokespeople. Latinos comprised 43% of the county population of 424,895 in 2010, and 70% of the 99,553-person city of Santa Maria, North County’s largest city. People were like, “oh they are actually advertising to us. They must be the campaign that has our interests at heart” (interview, Hazel Davalos). Some of these ads focused on how

loss of tax revenues from oil would hurt local schools that predominantly working-class Latino communities—composed largely of agricultural workers—depend on.² Yes on P not only had fewer resources for media outreach, but also made a costly mistake when non-resident campaign staff bought ads on Spanish-speaking radio in South, but not North, County. Not having as large of a base in North County, Yes on P spokespeople were typically from South County and therefore, were not people that most North County residents recognized.

The sheer quantity of No on P messages, which centered on loss of jobs and tax revenues, was also insurmountable. Proponents spent their energy countering industry lies, rather than educating the community about the water and health risks of fracking—a message that is as relevant to Latino agricultural workers as it is to white tourist sector employees, who both depend on the environment for their livelihoods. Creating doubt is a powerful tactic in and of itself, as evidenced by the fossil fuels industry’s efforts to manufacture doubt about climate change [11]. Central points around which doubt emerged were whether the initiative applied to existing oil wells (it did not), and, related to this, if the county would be at risk of lawsuits. A county staff report [12] with incorrect information exacerbated this situation and was cited by opponents throughout the campaign despite the report’s rejection by the County Supervisors. In Becca Claassen’s view, the county suffers from regulatory capture by the oil industry—staff in Santa Barbara County’s Energy Division depend on the oil status quo for their jobs. Finally, industry arguments overstated the jobs and taxes supplied by the industry. Oil and gas production accounted for only 1.07% of county jobs and 2.65% of county property taxes [12] and directly threatens the county’s largest economic sectors—agriculture and tourism. The measure exempted existing production, and therefore, would have had little effect on existing jobs and tax revenues.

Insufficient groundwork leading up to the campaign was a primary weakness of its proponents’ efforts. They were a small grassroots group, that, on hearing that their efforts would be negated by oil expansion, decided to take electoral action in a much shorter period than is customary.

More established members of Santa Barbara County’s environmental community cautioned the proponents

2. For an example, see No on P ad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D45TdAk3Jnc>.

about the difficulty of passing a fracking ban in a mid-term election, which are known to have low voter turnout, especially among progressives. In interviews following the election, these established environmental and party figures also explained that the rapidity of the campaign inhibited relationship-building with local leaders, labor unions, key spokespeople, and potential donors. This likely contributed to surprising endorsements of No on P by the generally progressive *Santa Barbara Independent*—though a coalition of editors wrote against this endorsement—and by public safety groups such as the Santa Barbara Fire Fighters Local and Police Officers Association. As described above, it made it difficult to build relationships and cultivate support in the Latino community. More preparation time, explained Linda Krop, Chief Counsel of the Environmental Defense Center in Santa Barbara, might also have prevented the dissemination of false information by county staff.

It goes back to the starting early. When I've written initiatives before, I will often run them by county staff and counsel, and say here's what we're trying to do . . . [agency staff can't take a formal position, but] they can look at it and say, "What do you mean by this?" or "We are concerned about how this might affect well maintenance," and then we can have that conversation and resolve it before it hits the streets and then we don't have the county's opposition. So all of those kind of preliminary things didn't happen (interview).

Many of these established groups, though skeptical and cautionary about the proponents' plans, came on board as momentum built. The local Democratic Party decided to endorse the measure soon after it qualified for the ballot and offered to partner with the campaign. The measure's proponents, overwhelmed by the input from people seen as experts in local elections and environmental politics, and tempted by the idea that securing the support of loyal Democrats and Independents who vote democratic would be their best chance to win, agreed. Though Santa Barbara County leans democratic, in October 2014, only 40% of voters were registered Democrats. Aligning with the Democratic Party may have dampened bipartisan support for the measure, whose focus on water quality had potential as a bipartisan message.

Turning the campaign over to the Democratic Party also had the effect of changing the structure of organizing. Whereas proponents had cultivated distributed

leadership with team captains during the signature phase, in the lead-up to the November election, this structure was replaced with phone banking and precinct walking in which volunteers were instructed, through a leadership hierarchy, to follow Democratic Party scripts to communicate with voters. While volunteers had previously focused on their own neighborhoods, in this model, they were distributed throughout the county, regardless of their residence. This, combined with burn-out from the signature effort, disillusioned some key volunteers, myself included. All volunteers, no matter what role they had played in the signature effort, were expected to return all data to the Democratic Party who took primary responsibility for compiling data, developing timelines, and determining which voters volunteers contacted. Becca Claassen co-originated the campaign and though she had the title of Campaign Committee Chair, felt disempowered by the new campaign structure. If she were to do it again, she explained that she would have advocated

starting voter contact much earlier, less phone calls and more door-to-door, more face-to-face, more empowerment and actual relationship building, not considering everybody on your list just a volunteer. Sure there are those people who just want to be told what to do . . . but there are other people who have valid concerns and opinions and know their neighborhoods better than you do. We were encouraged [by the Democratic Party] to just tell the volunteers what to do, make them stick to the script. It felt very hierarchical and top-down, not empowering, if anything it was disempowering (interview).

The collaboration did have positive elements. It allowed proponents to use Democratic Party office space, precinct and phone banking databases, and to have their measure on party literature. Together, Democratic Party and Yes on P volunteers made hundreds of thousands of phone calls and knocked on thousands of doors in an unprecedented field campaign in the county. Yet, alongside these benefits came a change in the spirit of the campaign that many core organizers regretted. They felt that the Democratic Party benefitted more from the popular movement proponents galvanized than the measure benefitted from the Democratic Party. They looked to the success of a 2014 fracking ban in San Benito County, where the grassroots originators of the campaign maintained autonomy from political

parties, as an example of a different method for carrying out the campaign. In 2016, Monterey County also successfully passed a ban with an autonomous grassroots campaign. Monterey County had a higher percentage of registered Democrats than Santa Barbara County, but also produced more oil and faced similar opposition funding.

The vote reflected sharp demographic and regional divides in the county. Overall, 39% of voters were in support, comprised largely of students and residents of the city of Santa Barbara. Nearly 80% of voters in North County, largely Latinos and conservative leaning white voters, were against the measure compared to 41.5% in South County. These results were also affected by epically low voter turnout. Nationwide, it was the lowest in 72 years [13] and in Santa Barbara, only 58% of registered voters cast votes. Students, the strongest supporters of the measure, with 80% yes votes, had only 15% voter turnout.

CONCLUSION

Though Measure P failed, it was an impressive grassroots mobilization, particularly in the signature-gathering phase. With more preparation time, less opposition from the oil industry and county staff, and greater voter turnout, the results may have been different. While heads of established environmental organizations in Santa Barbara feared the defeat would be a setback for local environmental politics, these fears did not materialize. Rather than dissipating, the energy behind Measure P seemed to infuse political will for other forms of progressive environmental policy.

In spring 2015, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors approved the state's most stringent carbon emissions levels for oil projects and funded a feasibility study for community choice aggregation, which could increase renewable energy. In November 2016, the board rejected an oil project with stricter controls than the Santa Maria Energy Project, described above, which the same board *approved* in 2013. In the 2016 election, a former environmental attorney won the contentious 3rd District Supervisor seat, which straddles North and South County, maintaining a three to two progressive majority on the Board of Supervisors. Her opponent received over \$60,000 in funding from energy producers.

Positive energy outcomes have occurred in other locations as well. In the 2014 and 2016 elections, there were multiple ballot and legislative efforts to ban fracking throughout the United States. Just a month after Measure

P's defeat, New York State banned fracking. With the addition of Monterey County, California now has six counties that have banned fracking. Monterey County's "Measure Z" is more restrictive than Measure P, banning intensive techniques, wastewater injection, and *all* future conventional wells.

Moving forward, grassroots groups could learn from this case to cultivate and empower horizontal leadership, build strong long-term coalitions with all sectors of communities, stay on their strongest message, and counter jobs versus environment debates by incorporating support for renewable energy industry jobs in projects to oppose oil and gas development.

CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What were the concerns and perceived opportunities that precipitated this campaign?
2. Identify benefits and problems that resulted from activists' alliance with the Democratic Party. Would you have partnered with the Democratic Party? Explain.
3. Reflect on the researcher's involvement with the campaign. Do you think researchers should be involved with the groups they study? Explain. What ethical issues arise? How can these be mitigated?
4. Consider ballot measures in comparison to other ways to restrict oil and gas development, such as legal suits, direct action, campaigning for or lobbying elected leaders who are anti-oil and gas, or corporate social responsibility. What opportunities and challenges does this change-making strategy entail?
5. What sectors of, and spokespeople from your community would you want to approach and have on your side before trying to enact change on an issue that is relevant to your life?

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Slides S1: Measure P Case Slides (pptx, pdf)

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