

"RESISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL" IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA!

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Even a blinding rainstorm couldn't stop more than 200 grassroots leaders from converging at an LA airport hotel early in January for the conference, "From Resistance to Persistence," organized by Sea Change, Rep. Karen Bass's (CA 37) political action committee. California had surprised the country by flipping all seven targeted Republican House seats in November, five of them in Southern California. These So-Cal activists gathered to celebrate, analyze, and plan how to sustain the momentum of their explosive civic organizing that had mobilized an estimated 35,000 volunteers, many of whom had never been involved in politics before. More than 120 groups sent key organizers; conference-goers from the "Class of '16" included representatives from Women for American Values and Ethics (WAVE) based in Orange County, Flip the 49th, Huntington Beach Huddle, CA 25 United for Progress, CA 39 Action Council, multiple Indivisible chapters, Flip the 14, Civic Sundays, Westside Dem HQ, Code Blue, and Swing Left. According to one Orange County participant, "Turning the OC blue changed forever what's possible in California and 90% of the leaders who helped that happen are here today!"

"We won big in November because we started voter engagement early, we worked hard, and we all worked together," said Sea Change director Mariah Craven to open the conference. Indeed, the gathering mirrored the winning coalition: "Class of '16" activists mingled with longtime Democratic Club stalwarts and veteran organizers from established groups such as Health Access, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in LA (CHIRLA), Groundwork, NextGen, the Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood, California Calls/Million Voter Project, Courage Campaign, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Service Employees International (SEIU), and the powerful labor federations from Orange and Los Angeles counties.

Campaign staff for new Congressmembers Gil Cisneros, Katie Hill, Harley Rouda, Katie Porter and Mike Levin spoke on panels, and the conference was emceed by prominent USC sociologist Manuel Pastor, author of the well-reviewed new book, STATE OF RESISTANCE: What California's Dizzying Descent and Remarkable Resurgence Mean for America's Future (New Press, 2018).

The crowd couldn't get enough of their own turnout success story: "We had 1000 volunteers on Election Day who knocked on 50,000 doors!" crowed Zack Czajkowski, campaign manager for Rep. Katie Hill (CA-25). "Steve Knight didn't stand a chance."

I've been an activist for 50 years in the social justice movement, but I had never put *any* time or organizing energy into a *midterm* election before. My very first electoral foray for a candidate was only ten years ago, as a "super volunteer" for Barack Obama for two months, phone-banking, door-knocking on weekends in Nevada, and training and mobilizing volunteers to head to other swing states like New Mexico and Colorado – doing all the grunt work that determines whether candidates win or lose campaigns. In fact, that year California was the hub of the largest-ever Presidential volunteer field operation in history, but it flew under the political radar because we weren't a swing state. In 2016, I hosted a phonebank for Hillary for six weeks, and then, under the banner of "Team TO," organized over 160 people to travel from Los Angeles to Las Vegas to help get out the vote during the election's final week.

After Hillary lost the electoral vote to Trump, I joined the stream of outraged folks to the streets – the Women's March, the Muslim ban protest – and then dove into early organizing toward the midterm. This time, California had its own swing districts: the seven Republican-held seats that had voted for Hillary. We turned our fury toward fixing that pesky Democratic Party Achilles Heel: low midterm turnout. We went after those voters we called "midterm skippers."

In early 2017, Team T.O. became Team TO Resist and Rise. We partnered with Sea Change and focused our efforts on flipping two House seats closest to our group of 100 regular volunteers in westside LA: coastal Orange County's CD-48 and CD 25 in northern Los Angeles County. Over the past two years, we've met monthly, organized three \$50-per-person fundraising events that raised \$420,000, and knocked on 40,000 doors. We currently have 750 people on our email list. About half of the group is brand new to politics; the other half are longtime feminist and LGBTQ activists. Like many pop-up "resistance" groups, it's 80% middle-aged or older college-educated women, mostly Anglo.

What I've learned is that my group is one of thousands of similar new groups across the country that are reshaping civic engagement in America. Political scientists Lara Putnam and Theda Skocpol, who have studied these new civic activists, describe "a national pattern of mutually

energizing local groups” comprised “primarily of... college-educated women [who] have ramped up their political participation *en masse*.” (Lara Putnam and Theda Skocpol, “Middle America Reboots Democracy,” Democracy, February 20, 2018.)

To me, this recent electoral wave felt similar to the volunteer uprising of the Obama campaign in 2008 but burned at a new, white-hot level of intensity, due to the cruelty and chaos of the Trump administration.

The LA January Sea Change conference consolidated our strength. We had been a loose network of intently focused local groups who occasionally shared information across Congressional districts via Zoom calls or statewide list-serves, but until the LA gathering, most of us had never actually met in person. “It felt like a celebratory family reunion,” said one of the participants, “except that we were a family who had never been in the same room together before.” After a packed day that went from 8-5, many folks stayed meeting and mingling in the hotel bar until nearly 9 p.m.

Many of the activists hoped that the gathering would mark the start of a potent new California coalition which could not only hold these new House seats but also revitalize the clubby state Democratic Party and support campaigns around progressive issues such as the housing and universal healthcare. The gathering recognized that Trump united disparate groups together for a common goal – taking back the House – but that people who work on different issues need to find common ground outside of their electoral work. Many observed that only by keeping volunteers and voters engaged in between elections can we build a movement with real staying power, one that can help take back the Senate, and even the White House and inject progressive policy ideas onto the public agenda.

Along with dissecting the electoral wins, speakers linked traditional Democratic Party electoral partners (such as feminist and LGBTQ groups, and unions) and the new resistance groups. And we explored key campaign issues such as healthcare, immigration, climate change, economic inequality: “When *will* we get a coherent economic message?” asked Professor Pastor.

The conversation was more than a pep rally. It was an opportunity to share new skills and strategies from each others’ experiences as part of the extraordinary civic uprising that led up to the November elections. For example, in Orange County, bi-lingual Korean and Vietnamese youth with Turning the Tide/OC (a project of the Korean Resource Center) traveled back

to the neighborhoods they grew up in to knock on doors and convince their conservative grandparents to vote blue.

The activists shared their experiences with new technologies, including new texting and canvassing apps that make cell-to-cell connecting and door-to-door canvassing more efficient and effective. Across Southern California, we all subscribed to Swing SoCal Left's weekly online calendar of events in or for all "flippable" districts. We also all belonged to the unity-fostering "Action Councils" in every swing district that brought together the crazy-quilt of in-district and out-of-district ally groups. For example, in the 25th Congressional district, 61 different organizations joined forces and coordinated efforts to register voters and get them to the polls, for the primary and then for Katie Hill. That collaboration powered winning turnout and synergy.

If there's one lesson that we all learned over the two years leading up to the November blue wave, it is this: *Organizing works!* Veteran campaign guru Steve Barkan presented a first look at turnout data. Voter turnout across the country was higher than for any midterm election since 1914. In the five key Southern California House races that flipped seats from Republican to Democrat, it was particularly robust, reaching almost the same level as presidential elections. Barkan emphasized that independent voters (Decline to State/No Party Preference) swung solidly for Democratic candidates in both Los Angeles and Orange counties, a key factor in districts that had long been safe enclaves for Republican politicians. He pointed out that targeting a key group of 186,800 newly registered and "occasional" Dem voters across these five districts will determine future electoral success.

Brian Colker, from Code Blue (a strong new group that put full-time organizers in 11 red California Congressional districts) wowed the crowd with a national poll he'd commissioned by Change Research comparing the efficacy of different ways to contact voters. No surprise, door-to-door canvassing works best – more so than phone calls or even TV ads. But, to our surprise, Colker's research showed that sending postcards from out of district proved surprisingly effective too.

Rep. Julia Brownley (CA-27) warned that activists shouldn't get complacent once they turn a district from Democrat to Republican. Her own experience in purple Ventura County was that it took three election cycles – six years – to "own" rather than simply "rent" her red-to-blue seat. She urged the gathering to continue organizing in these new Democratic seats, and to realize that our newly-elected Congresspeople might occasionally

vote for legislation that progressives dislike, but that we shouldn't abandon them based on some purist litmus test.

Rep. Karen Bass (CA-37), the newly elected Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, and a rising star in Speaker Nancy Pelosi's orbit, got three standing ovations, demonstrating her unparalleled leadership role as the bridge in southern California between official Democratic Party and the grassroots. Her speech sparkled with insider DC stories (on avoiding Steve Knight in the elevator; calling now-Rep. Katie Porter election night to buck her up; and praising Pelosi: "Boy, has Trump finally met his match!").

Bass exhorted activists to apply for upcoming redistricting commissions, and to work actively with new Congressmembers to hold onto these newly Democratic districts. Ever the community organizer, Bass had put together the very first busload of Los Angeles volunteers in March 2017 to door-knock in Palmdale, Lancaster, and other parts of the 25th Congressional district. By defying conventional electoral practice and sending in volunteer troops a full 15 months *before* the primary to listen to voters and educate them on Republican incumbent Rep. Steve Knight's actual record, Bass imprinted on the still-new "resistance" movement the importance of door-knocking early and often. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) followed her lead, opening offices several months later and making an unprecedented investment in TV and radio in these Southern California races (particularly in the primary) that a year earlier were considered long shots for Democrats. Thanks in no small part to Rep. Bass and Sea Change's early work, the DCCC recognized that the winning strategy was to "arm the rebels." Their staff worked side by side with local volunteer leaders of the myriad "resistance" groups to engage every possible disgruntled person in every possible arena.

So.... what's next? We've never actually walked this road before, so we're figuring it out as we march on. But, based on conversations with many of these new activists, these are some thoughts:

I. Harden the infrastructure of this new electoral coalition. Keep the rebels armed! Code Blue's Brian Colker is circulating a \$52 million proposal asking big donors and the national Democratic Party to fund 200 offices across the country – soon! -- including office rent, technology, legal and organizing staff, so that the decentralized wave of local grassroots groups can have what it needs to become a permanent powerful force. Surely the funding is there, but will the Democratic National Committee under chair Tom Perez have the vision to fund grassroots activists outside its traditional network?

2. Continue movement-building. Longtime progressives in social justice movements and new “resistance” volunteer leaders have a natural skepticism of each other that only time, trust, and working together will break down. The “Class of `16” is volunteer, less ideological, more Anglo, older, and less politically experienced than those people leading California’s vibrant multiracial progressive movement, based in a networked set of nonprofits. Fortunately, veteran organizer-politicians like Rep. Karen Bass have gained the trust of every facet of this movement and can help build the necessary bridges by convening more meetings like the LA gathering.

3. Political education. Many of the grassroots “resistance” activists view themselves as on the left, but a winning coalition to engage in local issue campaigns and strengthen the electoral momentum has to keep recruiting and sustaining activists who don’t consider themselves progressives. The ground is fertile. The protests against Trump’s Muslim ban and “family separation” policy engaged people of conscience who care about tolerance and families, regardless of how they identify ideologically. The recent teachers’ strike in Los Angeles garnered surprisingly strong support from, well, everyone.

That broad coalition will be necessary in California in order to win the next big political battle here – the effort to reform the state’s 1978 tax-limitation law, Proposition 13, which slashed property taxes for corporations and homeowners and catastrophically undermined the state’s schools, universities and public services. It has taken 40 years for the public to get fed up with the consequences of Proposition 13, and a ballot measure, already qualified for 2020, called “Schools and Communities First,” would keep property tax limits for homeowners but upend them for commercial property. The so-called “split roll” measure could add \$11 billion a year in revenues targeted for schools and local government services. Most of the California’s corporate community – and their counterparts around the country – are lining up to fund a huge campaign to defeat the measure. That battle will be the first major test of whether the new grassroots electoral movement can find common ground with progressive California.

Conclusion: Turning Orange County blue changed the game in California. Future gatherings of these new and old groups will have to tackle the question: What will it take to sustain California’s new bottom-up civic power as an effective movement for change? If the Resistance doesn’t break into warring fragments, and if we hone our internal communications and infrastructure, keep building relationships of trust between the longtime

and the new leaders, and convince national Democratic Party and big donors to keep “arming the rebels,” we will hold our seven new red-to-blue House seats, play a big part in 2020 in flipping the Senate and the White House blue too, and increase economic and racial justice in the Golden State.

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