



A Democracy Win: Proposition 17 in California

By Sarah Kowal, May 2021

Voting rights and democracy in general have been important topics within America, especially in the past two elections. States from east to west have been fighting their own battles to keep and expand voting rights. One of these states is California.

In November of 2020, democracy triumphed in California. An amendment to the CA Constitution called Proposition 17 was passed. The amendment allows people on parole with a felony conviction to vote. This means that in California— one of 19 states in which citizens lose their right to vote while incarcerated – will have their voting rights restored immediately upon release.¹ Prior to the passing of this amendment, California was part of a group with 18 other states in which voting rights are restored only after a full sentence, including parole is, completed.² Clearly, there are still many battles to be fought regarding voting rights with a felony conviction, but California has fought, and won, one of these battles with the passing of Proposition 17.

In order to make this amendment successful, there were many campaigns, coalitions, and organizations who worked on behalf of its passing. One of these

¹ "Restoration of Voting Rights for Felons." Felon Voting Rights. Accessed May 13, 2021. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx>.

² Ibid

campaigns was *Yes on Prop 17*. But, in order to fully explain the origins of the campaign, we must start at the very beginning, with the creation of the Proposition itself.

According to Brett Shears, the Co-Chair of the Communications Committee of the *Yes on Prop 17*, the campaign can trace its roots to an idea from a currently incarcerated man named Rahsaan Thomas. Thomas is a board member of Initiate Justice, an organization working towards ending mass incarceration by empowering those who are directly impacted.³ Thomas suggested that they start a grassroots campaign, through Initiate Justice, to address the systemic problems of the criminal justice system, specifically felony disenfranchisement.

This early work led to a signature drive in late 2017 to get an initiative onto the ballot that would “strike all provisions that created felony disenfranchisement in the state,” according to Mr. Shears. Although this first initiative did receive “tens of thousands of signatures,” it was not able to make it much farther than that. However, Mr. Shears and the other grassroots organizers were not deterred and because of their willingness to tackle, in his words, the “Herculean undertaking” of collecting more than half a million signatures, Proposition 17 was born.

This first attempt at a ballot initiative garnered enough support for Assembly member Kevin McCarty to propose an Assembly sponsored constitutional amendment. It was then that this initiative really began to gain momentum. According to Mr. Shears, they used the “original coalition and

³ "Initiate Justice." Initiate Justice. February 22, 2021. Accessed May 13, 2021. <https://www.initiatejustice.org/>.

expanded by bringing in a lot of well known groups like the ACLU and the League of Women Voters.” Together, the original coalition and new supporters used their resources to help the legislation move forward. The ballot measure passed in the Assembly “by the absolute minimum margin” in September, 2019. Then it passed in the State Senate in June 2020 as well. So, because of the passing of what was then known as ACA 6, this legislation would officially go on the ballot in November 2020.

From here, Mr. Shears and his colleagues began to formally organize this initiative in order to encourage citizens to vote in its favor. Thus, the Yes on Prop 17 campaign was born. Mr. Shears maintained his role as Co-Chair of the Communications Committee, which has chaired since the process with ACA 6 began. However, now this role was a part of the newly formed Yes on Prop 17 campaign, where he worked alongside Dr. Jiggy Athilingam, his co-chair, and many others to ensure the success of the campaign and, most importantly, the success of Proposition 17.

With many things to be proud of, from the creation of the campaign and the work that lead up to it, to the ultimate passing of Proposition 17, Mr. Shears emphasized a few key things that he really valued about his time with the campaign. Mr. Shears mentioned that the organizers were “intentional about highlighting the stories of and amplifying the voices of people directly impacted by this proposition: And this is people on parole.” Representation and amplification of the voices of those directly impacted is incredibly important. The Yes on Prop 17 campaign consciously focused on this.

Additionally, unlike most other campaigns, the volunteers on the Yes on Prop 17 campaign “were keenly aware of and sensitive to the language [they] were using, both in terms of achieving [their] long term goals... but also the short term goals of this specific campaign.” Mr. Shears highlighted that campaigns have a very particular, short term goal they are working to achieve. While members of this campaign were focused on this short term goal of passing Proposition 17, they were also incredibly in touch with the long term goals of the legislation that would extend well beyond the campaign, which is very unique.

In November 2020, democracy won in California. The people who have been doing this work for decades, those who have initiated previous changes in the Constitution that lead to this, and all other volunteers, coalitions, and campaigns, succeeded when Proposition 17 passed.

However, there is still more work to be done. Mr. Shears advised those passionate about democracy to “think long and hard about whose voices are being heard and whose voices are not,” something that the Yes on Prop 17 campaign clearly worked very hard to do. Mr. Shears and the Small Planet Institute agree that there is hope for the future of democracy. This win in California that started with a small group of empowered and passionate individuals, demonstrates that we can make change if we truly want to. Proposition 17’s passing in California was a win for our democracy and it shows that if we keep fighting for change, it will come.

Resources

"Initiate Justice." Initiate Justice. February 22, 2021. Accessed May 13, 2021.
<https://www.initiatejustice.org/>.

"Restoration of Voting Rights for Felons." Felon Voting Rights. Accessed May 13, 2021. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx>.