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Debunking the red state-blue state divide, this cartogram is based on population size, not on the physical area of a state (which has little to do with political representation). Red, blue, and shades of purple indicate percentages voting Republican, Democrat, and a mix of the two, county-by-county.

by **Dan Petegorsky**
*Executive Director
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Feeling Purple:

A MIXED STATE OF HOPE AND DESPAIR

For all the red state/blue state talk, progressives in the West had remarkable successes in November, even in states that show up bright red on the traditional maps. Virtually every group we worked with exceeded their mobilization goals, registering and turning out tens of thousands of voters from historically under-represented constituencies and conducting compelling and effective voter education efforts in the process. As you will read in this issue, our own board member Nicole LeFavour was elected as the first openly lesbian state legislator in Idaho's history, and the City of Portland is on the verge of enacting the nation's first system of full public financing for municipal elections.

In a broader sense, 2004 saw an unprecedented level of new energy and infusion of new blood for constituency-based organizations all across the region. Of course, in light of George Bush's reelection it's hard to be too cheerful about the near-term prospects for major progressive victories, especially at the Federal level. Those with a longer view of history have found solace in the words of the early 19th century Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker as they were adapted into a saying famously used by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

Remaining hopeful, even defiant, in the face of rampant and deepening injustice is no small task. Without the confidence that some day justice will prevail, it's hard to maintain the courage and persistence we need as organizers. But we cannot pretend that the circumstances are less dire than they are.

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Despair and Hope cont. from page 1

Less frequently cited than Dr. King's words is a short poem by Langston Hughes entitled simply, "Justice."

*That Justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we blacks are wise:
Her bandage hides two festering sores
That once perhaps were eyes.*

November's election provided cause for both hope and despair: despair that the current Administration's efforts to dismantle what earlier generations fought so hard to achieve will proceed even more rapidly, but hope that resistance is flourishing and that, from the ground up, we are diligently building change that will ultimately succeed.

Issues vs. Identity

One of the most persistent dilemmas facing progressives is that while substantial majorities often support progressive positions on issues when they are polled, too often that's not the way people end up voting. In looking at working class voters who support Republican candidates, for example, we often hear progressives and pundits alike describe them as "voting against their own self-interest." As the argument goes, "they support us on the issues," but still vote "the wrong way."

But the idea that "they're with us on the issues" misses a key point, summed up well by Adam Cohen writing on November 15th in the *New York Times* about George Lakoff's work:

"Republicans understand that people vote their identity, not their self-interest — that they seek out candidates whose values appear to match their own." Unless issues are framed by an overall sense of identity, identity will generally trump issues.

Wedge issues are designed to draw a line in the sand: to get people to *identify* themselves on one side of a sharp moral line that separates them from those on the other side. Proponents of what might seem to be radical positions on issues — if they draw the lines well — can pull a majority towards them. Dr. King was an effective spokesperson with white Americans by drawing the line in front of the violent segregationists, forcing whites to choose



whether or not to identify with the most virulent expressions of white supremacy or with a sense of common decency.

Too often of late, progressives have found themselves on the defensive and being painted onto the wrong side of the line. Arguing that people are "voting against their self-interest" doesn't help. A key principle of organizing is that people should get to define their own self-interest. So having "liberals" from outside a community telling those in a different community that they are acting against their self-interest simply plays into stereotypes of outside elites trying to tell local people what to do or how to think. It's a prescription for failure.

Apart from framing issues in different terms, progressives will win only if we can establish more credible, long-term organizing efforts inside those communities we seek to mobilize. It won't happen over night; it won't happen solely through crafting new frames or messages — important as that is — and it won't happen only by parachuting in large numbers of staff in a handful of target districts in the few months before Presidential elections.

But we must remember: it *can* happen. Read our new staff member Lucilene Lira's piece on organizing in Brazil to get a sense of what diligent movement-building entails. Then reflect on the fact that the very forces that began organizing under a brutal military dictatorship in the 1980s moved from the margins of society to win governing state power when in 2002 their Workers' Party candidate was elected President of Brazil. 