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# Building a Twenty-First-Century Environmental Movement That Wins: Twenty Years of Environmental Justice Organizing by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network

Roger Kim and Martha Matsuoka

## Abstract

Over the past twenty years, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) has engaged in innovative strategies for building grassroots leadership in Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities to bring important perspectives to the movement for environmental justice. Founded in 1993, APEN strategies include community organizing and leadership development, policy development and advocacy, multiracial movement building, and, most recently, electoral organizing and civic engagement to affect state climate and energy policy.

This article reflects on lessons learned in organizing to elevate the power of AAPIs to influence the public debates over the environment and influence public policy that affects where AAPIs live, work, play, and go to school. We focus on a case study of the successful defeat of Proposition 23, a California ballot initiative that would have suspended the nation's toughest state-level greenhouse gas emissions program and point to the increasing role and power of AAPIs in determining state and national climate policy. For organizers, policy makers, and environmental advocates in particular, the campaign illustrates the importance of integrating an electoral strategy with community organizing work to educate and turn out voters to advance progressive environmental policy change.

Lessons from APEN's twenty years illustrate the past and current role of AAPIs in environmental activism and policy and the strategies necessary to tap demographic changes in order to strengthen a comprehensive strategy to combat climate change,

accelerate the development of an equitable clean energy economy, and ensure a livable planet for future generations.

## Introduction

This article presents the work of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) and the evolution of an organization that has—over the long term—sought to advance environmental justice not only to Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities but also to ensure environmental justice for all communities. The work is presented by authors who lend perspective as an executive director and a founding board member about APEN’s goals, strategies, campaigns, and accomplishments and challenges over the last two decades. From our early work on community gardens to our ongoing campaigns in Richmond and Oakland, California, to our statewide policy and electoral work, we present these experiences in order to provide lessons learned from campaigns—some won, others lost—that redefine what environment means to them and raises the visibility and power of AAPI communities to make changes in their daily lives and for the future. While APEN’s work focuses within California, its work and lessons learned point to important and necessary directions for addressing environmental conditions in AAPI communities and building the leadership of AAPIs to influence the decision making that defines where we live, work, play, pray, and go to school.

## APEN’s Movement History

In 1991, leaders from Native American, Pacific Islander, and low-income, immigrant, and working-class communities of color convened in Washington, D.C., for the First National People of Color Environmental Summit. Joined by allies and supporters, the 301 delegates set in motion a process of redefining environmental issues in their own terms and connecting local and regional activism to a national scale.<sup>1</sup> The Summit was the symbolic launch of a powerful grassroots movement led by people of color and Native American and Pacific Islander communities in the United States that directly challenged the existing top-down power of mainstream environmental organizations as well as the power of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The new movement’s central goal, “we speak for ourselves,” centered community knowledge and empowerment, justice, and political power as central tenets of

the movement that would redefine environmental issues and open up decision making for communities that had traditionally been locked out. The summit's delegates included 55 Native American, 158 African American, 64 Latino, and 24 AAPIs.<sup>2</sup> For the dozen or so Asian Americans at the summit, the summit raised important issues of representation in the dynamic birth of a movement as well as the potential role the emerging movement might play in the existing AAPI communities. Among the delegates were Peggy Saika, Young Shin, and Pam Tau Lee, longtime activist leaders in the San Francisco Bay Area who had deep roots in the civil rights, labor, Third World people's, and women's movements along with Miya Yoshitani, Vivian Chang, and Pamela Chiang, undergraduate students at U.C. Berkeley and members of Nindakin, one of the first environmental justice student groups in the country. When they returned from the summit, they convened a broad group of Asian American leaders to pose critical questions: How do we inject an environmental justice perspective into the AAPI community? How do we bring an AAPI perspective into the environmental justice movement? How could the environmental justice movement contribute to a stronger AAPI voice in influencing the decisions that impact their families and their communities?

Led by Peggy Saika, Pam Tau Lee, and other summit delegates, these discussions ultimately led to the formation of APEN in 1993 to address these questions. Along with other regional anchor networks—Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice, the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, Indigenous Environmental Network, Farmworkers Network for Economic and Environmental Justice, and the Northeast Environmental Justice Network—APEN began the work of building a national-scale community-based movement focused on environmental justice. For APEN, this meant grounding the emerging movement in issues critical to low-income, immigrant, and refugee communities: immigration and refugee status, language, poverty, domestic and community violence, and the need to build leadership in its growing youth population.

### People, Place, and Power: Building Models Locally

Using an environmental justice lens, APEN assessed the organizational and political AAPI landscape in the Bay Area in the early 1990s in order to prioritize issues and develop early strate-

gies. Following the environmental justice principle that communities most negatively impacted by environmental degradation must lead the new movement, APEN decided to begin its organizing in the Laotian community in Richmond, California, a community that resettled in the aftermath of the Vietnam War in a neighborhood surrounded by more than 350 industrial sites and toxic hazards, including the Chevron oil refinery. The community faces extreme levels of pollution as well as poverty. One-quarter of Bay Area Laotians—about ten thousand people comprised of Lao, Khmu, Mien, and Hmong ethnic groups—live under the federal poverty level; close to one-third of all Laotian children live in poverty. Laotian communities have educational levels far below average, among the lowest in California. Only 6 percent in the Bay Area’s Laotian community has a bachelor’s degree or higher. Fifty-eight percent have less than a high school attainment.

In 1995, APEN established the Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) as an intergenerational, interethnic community-led organization where Laotian families came together to transform the community into a place that is safe and healthy to live, work, and play.<sup>3</sup> Its initial campaigns focused on educating families about lead in Asian dishware and the health effects from eating contaminated seafood caught from subsistence fishing from the San Francisco Bay. We organized a community garden and also established a youth program, Asian Youth Advocates (AYA), as a way to develop the leadership of young women and bring families together. In 1999, LOP launched its first campaign that demanded that Contra Costa County institutionalize a multilingual warning system that would notify communities when explosions or other accidents occurred at the neighboring Chevron plant. LOP won the campaign in late 2000, but it would take nearly five years of continued organizing to implement the system. Meanwhile, AYA youth organized to establish an academic student advising program at Richmond High School, and LOP began working in coalition with community, environmental, and labor allies. In 2001, LOP helped pass one of the highest living wages in the country and began a campaign to pass a city ordinance to stop illegal evictions. In 2009, APEN in coalition with the Richmond Equitable Development Initiative (REDI) pushed the City of Richmond to enact a “Just Cause” ordinance protecting tenants from unfair evictions from foreclosed homes.

Through REDI, LOP has forged campaigns that engage local residents in Richmond's general planning process in order to address problems linked directly with the built environment—such as lack of open space for physical activities, a lack of safe affordable housing, auto and truck emissions from freeways, and polluting industries in close proximity to homes and schools. Engaging in the general plan process allowed LOP members to inject their experiences and perspectives on environmental health and economic equity in a systemic manner that determines long-term land use decisions.

While APEN is working to rebuild Richmond based on a new vision for a healthy, green, and just community, we continue to address the existing environmental conditions created by one of the country's biggest polluters and contributors to greenhouse gases, Chevron. With our grassroots base in the lead, APEN joined forces with Communities for a Better Environment, West County Toxics Coalition, and Earthjustice, in an effort to stop Chevron's \$1 billion expansion project that would allow them to process a heavier and dirtier crude oil, exposing the community to increased health and environmental impacts. Chevron, already the largest industrial source of greenhouse gas emissions in the state, would have increased its greenhouse gas emissions by almost one million tons as a result of this project poisoning the climate and the people near the refinery. Through a combination of organizing and legal, media, and advocacy tactics, APEN and our allies successfully stopped the project and is now pushing for demands that would not only protect the community from an increase in pollution, but also would lead the way for other communities in the fight to hold pollution-based industries accountable for a just transition away from a fossil fuel economy.

In 2002, APEN launched a second organizing effort, Power in Asians Organizing (PAO) to organize low-income residents in Oakland's Chinatown. Facing similar conditions in Richmond, APEN organizers began the challenging task of organizing a base of leaders in Chinatown to come together into a unified voice. At the time Oakland's diverse Asian population included sixty thousand people of Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, Filipino, and other ethnic backgrounds. The per capita income for the area's AAPI households was \$7,795, less than 56 percent of the citywide average, and 39 percent lived below the federal poverty level.<sup>4</sup>

Similar to the Laotian community in Richmond, Asians in Oakland also have limited access to culturally appropriate services, adequate health care, and lack access to decision makers to impact change. This community also bears a disproportionately higher burden of toxic exposure in the workplace and in their homes. Yet PAO and its allies won justice for low-income residents who were mass evicted from the Pacific Renaissance Plaza in Oakland's Chinatown. The victory saved affordable housing units in the building and won guarantees to build more affordable rental units in Chinatown. The campaign for affordable housing led to a series of campaigns to ensure that Chinatown/East Lake Merritt communities, where AAPIs make up close to 40 percent of the population, have a voice in the planning and development decisions that affect their communities. PAO leaders along with allies from labor, faith, community, and environmental circles, organized to win a community benefits campaign from the city's Oak-to-9th Redevelopment Project and is now focused, along with their allies in Chinatown, on designing the Lake Merritt Development Project for a transit-oriented development around the Lake Merritt BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) station. The development project will result in almost three thousand new homes, four thousand additional residents, close to ten thousand new jobs, and a more compact, walkable community with a high-quality transit system. In less than ten years, PAO has grown to be one of the largest base-building organizations in Oakland with a membership of four hundred families and thirty-five leaders with power enough to put forward community-defined plans for improving conditions for AAPIs in Oakland.

Growing the community-based leadership in these two neighborhoods has established strong community-based organizations that advance environmental justice through campaigns that are driven by the wide range of lived experiences of low-income AAPI immigrant and refugee communities. Through campaigns in Richmond's diverse Laotian communities as well as the diverse Chinese communities in Oakland's Chinatown, APEN has developed hundreds of AAPI leaders engaged in environmental activism and change that is deeply rooted in family, community, and the neighborhoods where they live, work, play, pray, and go to school.

Building this grassroots AAPI leadership has pushed APEN to develop organizing competencies specific to AAPI communities. For example, we always acknowledge the need to adequate

language access but initially underestimated what it takes to allow people simply to talk to each other. Our Richmond meetings often operate in Lao, Khmu, and Mien languages, and in Oakland, Cantonese and Mandarin. Including English, bringing together our leaders from both cities requires simultaneous translation in six languages. Our organizing in Richmond focused on building a youth leadership program, AYA, as a strategy to engage youth as pivotal potential leaders and also as way to engage with their families. Today, three young women leaders who started in our youth program—Sandy Saeturn, Nita Sisamouth, and Nai Saeturn—are APEN staff members who are leading the organizing work in Richmond.

APEN's immigrant and refugee members bring a wide range of experiences and political views that weave together into a shared understanding of their lives in the United States. This shared understanding and the work to empower people to take action, however, doesn't "just happen." Community members, who come from countries with very different lived experiences of government, speak out regarding what it means to be a "leader" and what it means to build power in relation to other oppressed racial and ethnic groups and communities. Segregated neighborhoods, language and cultural barriers, gender and generational differences, and ideological differences present challenges met only through long-term community organizing and strong viable organizations that are able to amplify individual stories into a collective ones, build leadership skills among members, and continue to build and expand the numbers of grassroots leaders.

### Scaling-Up to State Policy and Power

By the mid-to-late 2000s, it was clear that in addition to successful community organizing and coalition work, APEN needed to engage in state policy debates for several reasons. While the economy was undergoing an enormous upheaval, we were also facing an unprecedented ecological crisis: climate change. Low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately impacted by global warming—imposing new economic and environmental burdens on low-income households. At the same time, climate change policies are expected to generate billions of dollars in investment and revenues, and will have a tremendous impact on how our cities are built, how development goals are set,



how public funding gets prioritized, and who has access to the basic rights of a healthy living environment. It was imperative that AAPI communities engage to ensure that the benefits and impacts of climate programs can be distributed equitably.

APEN needed to scale-up to influence the state policies that were systematically challenging AAPI communities. Although there have been significant policy wins and LOP and PAO are viewed as key political organizations in Richmond and Oakland, grassroots-led organizations still face formidable opposition in the form of corporations (e.g., Chevron), profit-seeking developers, and local policy and decision makers who maintain the status quo. The lessons learned through LOP organizing, for example, pointed to the need to not only target Chevron but also redirect state energy policy away from reliance on fossil fuels and toward alternative energy sources. Addressing gentrification and transportation in Chinatown meant that APEN needed to examine state transportation and funding policies as well as state housing policies to ensure that AAPI communities were helped, not harmed, by investments in housing and infrastructure.

A statewide policy focus also triggered the need to build AAPI grassroots power across California. The task was daunting yet a look at demographic shifts pointed to the strategic importance of statewide organizing. In California the number of AAPIs grew 33.6 percent in the last decade and AAPIs now constitute 15.5 percent of the state's population compared to 12.8 percent in 2000. In 2009, APEN and the California League of Conservation Voters conducted a poll of Asian voters to take the pulse of environmental attitudes among Asian voters. Some 83 percent of Asian voters considered themselves environmentalists (compared to 52 percent of all California voters), 85 percent would vote for a ballot measure to protect the environment, and 58 percent supported an increase in the gas tax in order to fund alternative energy.<sup>5</sup> As noted by Paul Ong earlier in this volume, the findings were consistent with a 2011 poll by the Public Policy Institute of California that found that people of color believe more strongly than whites that it is necessary to take steps immediately to counter the effects of climate change. Some 79 percent of Asians, 83 percent of blacks, and 88 percent of Latinos view climate change as a serious threat to the economy and quality of life for the state's future, as compared to 66 percent for whites.<sup>6</sup> With California now a majority people of color

state, and with AAPIs and Latinos alone representing more than 50 percent of the population, the new face and voice of environmentalism is emerging. Tapping the environmental values of this shifting demographic holds tremendous potential for advancing environmentalism and environmental justice in AAPI communities and in California.

Moreover, in addition to having strong environmental beliefs, AAPI voters show strong potential to be a key part of a progressive coalition in California. In 2010, for example, the California Labor Federation as part of its Million More Voters program conducted a massive microtargeting project, which included polling, focus groups, and sophisticated microtargeting techniques using more than eight hundred points of consumer and social data. The result was that nonunion Asians are twice as likely, compared to other groups, to have proworker and union sympathies. The impact of Asian entrepreneurship is clear and increasingly significant. According to research conducted by the White House Initiative on AAPIs more than one million Asian American entrepreneurs, many working in the clean energy economy, generate \$300 billion in sales and provide jobs for more than two million workers. A plurality of Asian American voters also “decline to state” their political party.

The strategic opportunity for organizing statewide became clear: AAPI communities are a critical piece of winning needed progressive policy change and can be a strong force on climate and clean energy issues that link communities and workers, environmental and business interests.

In 2010, APEN launched the Asian Pacific American Climate Coalition (APACC) to build alliances with AAPI organizations up and down the state in order to advance climate solutions in California. This is the first and only coalition of AAPI organizations working on climate change in the United States. APEN’s goal is to organize a strong progressive AAPI voice to work alongside our multiracial allies to win racially just climate policies. We developed a training program on climate change and environmental justice and took it on the road from the Bay Area to Los Angeles, Fresno, and Sacramento. More than one hundred organizations serving the AAPI community from various sectors (e.g., housing, service, worker, faith, health, and organizing) joined our climate trainings and subsequently APACC.

Immediately following the trainings, APACC jumped into mobilizing APA voters to defeat Proposition 23 in the November 2010 elections as part of Communities United. Given the dozens of APA languages spoken, we knew that community organizations were best equipped to speak to voters through endorsements, media buys, mailings, and phone banks. In addition to APACC, APEN also expanded its electoral organizing work to build power with AAPI voters statewide (see case study below).

### AAPIs and Climate Justice: A Case Study of Statewide Organizing and Power Building

The summer of 2010 was gearing up to be a nightmare for environmentalists and climate activists. In May 2010, Proposition 23, a California state ballot initiative that would have suspended the nation's toughest state-level greenhouse gas emissions reduction program, qualified for the November 2010 ballot. Just a few months later, the federal climate and energy bill was abandoned by Democratic leadership because of a lack of support in the Senate. If Proposition 23 passed, it would have been another devastating blow to the climate movement in the United States.

Proposition 23 was a sneaky attempt to take advantage of the dire economic conditions in California. With unemployment at 12 percent, its proponents dubbed the proposition the "California Jobs Initiative." The initiative made a seemingly reasonable sounding proposal: the state's greenhouse gas emissions reductions program, AB 32 or California's Global Warming Solutions Act, would be suspended until the state's official unemployment rate fell to 5.5 percent or less for four quarters in a row. Bankrolled by two Texas oil companies, Tesoro and Valero, in reality, Proposition 23 was an attempt to effectively kill AB 32 and derail climate policy across the nation. Unemployment in California has fallen below 6 percent only during economic booms and, since 1976, rarely for more than four quarters in a row.

For environmental and social justice organizations like APEN and our allies in California, in addition to derailing a popular and important climate policy, we also knew that this was a direct attack on low-income communities and communities of color who were already bearing the brunt of the dirty fossil fuel industry and impacts of climate change. We believed that AB 32, despite the criticisms many of us had for its implementation, was a groundbreak-

ing law that would protect public health and address the climate crisis. We knew we needed to respond.

Several environmental, economic, and social justice organizations formed Communities United Against the Dirty Energy Proposition (Communities United) to lead communities of color in the fight to defeat Proposition 23. The executive committee of Communities United included APEN, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, the Greenlining Institute, the California Environmental Justice Alliance,<sup>7</sup> and PowerPAC.

After years of on-the-ground organizing on environmental justice issues by an extensive network of environmental and social justice organizing groups throughout the state, we knew that low-income communities and communities of color cared deeply about defeating Proposition 23. Many environmental and social justice organizations also worked extensively on AB 32, educating their members and creating an important political consciousness in low-income communities and communities of color about California's greenhouse gas law and program, connecting asthma and respiratory diseases to copollutants that are emitted along with greenhouse gases.

We also knew that a much larger base of voters of color in California also supported AB 32 and could be swayed to vote "no" on Proposition 23. A poll by the Public Policy Institute of California in July 2010, once again, showed that voters of color more strongly support AB 32 than white voters in the state.<sup>8</sup>

We also learned lessons from past mistakes. In 2006, two progressive donors placed Proposition 87 on the ballot. Bankrolled at \$40 million, Proposition 87 would have placed a tax on oil company profits to fund renewable energy research and development. The Yes on 87 campaign, however, did not engage communities of color or low-income communities. The No on 87 campaign, funded by Chevron and other big oil companies, immediately and effectively framed the initiative as a tax on the poor and created a massive media campaign. Although the initiative initially polled strongly toward Yes on 87, the targeted media campaign combined with a lack of a Yes on 87 ground game in communities of color, it ultimately lost by nine points.

Initial polling on Proposition 23 showed that it would be a close election, and that voters of color were a key swing vote. Communities United was determined to get the message out to

low-income communities and communities of color first and frame the debate. We also wanted to show that community-based organizations have the sophistication and skills to organize and win a statewide electoral campaign.

Core elements of Communities United's campaign included:

- More than 250,000 one-on-one conversations on the doors or on the phone (in English, Spanish, Cantonese, and Mandarin). Communities United worked in partnership with existing, community-based electoral organizations, including California Calls, Mobilize the Immigrant Vote, APEN, California Environmental Justice Alliance, and PowerPAC.
- Coalition of more than 120 organizations and businesses working in low-income communities and communities of color.
- Direct mail pieces to more than 280,000 households (in English, Chinese, and Spanish) to targeted voters.
- Outreach to every ethnic media outlet in California, with community leaders who could speak the appropriate language of various outlets.
- College campus hip-hop tour and Statewide Days of Action. Through the community-based organizations, there was a network of indigenous leaders from these communities who could speak eloquently about the impacts of fossil fuels on the health of their families and children and why they were voting no on Proposition 23.
- Spanish-language radio ads in every major media market featuring Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Dolores Huerta.

APEN, for example, executed the only Asian-language media and field program on No on 23. Building on almost fifteen years of grassroots organizing and local electoral power building, the No on 23 campaign provided a platform to take our electoral work statewide. We created a team of trilingual phone bankers (Cantonese, Mandarin, and English) and talked directly with almost fifteen thousand Chinese immigrant voters. We identified almost eleven thousand supportive No on 23 voters, a rate of more than 70 percent.

Proposition 23 lost big, with 61.6 percent voting No on 23 and only 38.4 percent voting Yes on 23, and the impact of voters of color

was enormous. Voters of color rejected Proposition 23 by 73 percent while 57 percent of white voters voted against the initiative. This matched the more than 70 percent No on 23 ID or identification rate from all of Communities United phone banks across the state.

In fact, the impact of voters of color was historic on several key races. In the governor's race, Jerry Brown, who campaigned heavily on a clean energy jobs program, defeated E-Bay CEO Meg Whitman with 52 percent of the vote. Brown, however, lost the white vote (45 percent to 55 percent) but won voters of color overwhelmingly (64 percent to 36 percent) carrying him into office. Similarly, climate champion Senator Barbara Boxer defeated Carly Fiorina with 54 percent of the vote. Boxer lost the white vote (42 percent to 58 percent) but won a huge 67 percent of voters of color.

The perception among high-priced campaign consultants, mainstream environmental organizations, and philanthropy is, generally, that people of color don't care about environmental issues and they don't vote. Outreach and Get Out the Vote programs targeting voters of color, therefore, are not worth the investment. And this was exactly the direction that the main campaign was headed until environmental and social justice leaders formed Communities United and forced them to the table.

The power of voters of color in defeating Proposition 23, considered the most important climate and green economic development policy victory in the nation in 2010, proves people of color are a powerful political force on climate and environmental sustainability. The campaign clarified our work in a number of ways.

First, the campaign brought the debate over energy policy to the voters and the high-profile and contentious debates revealed the clear and competing visions for California's future. Californians and voters of color, in particular, believe strongly in clean energy policies because they will help clean up the air and grow jobs and the economy. Second, it proved to mainstream environmental organizations that environmental justice organizations, particularly those engaged in base-building community organizing, were effective in reframing the energy debate and mobilizing a diverse base of electorate to take action.

The campaign also illustrated the importance of integrating an electoral strategy with the community organizing work. Community-based efforts to educate and turn out voters are needed to win progressive policies. As the population of the state is changing

quickly, community-based organizations are using their membership base, skills, and work rooted on issues that people care about to educate voters and change the electorate. To further scale-up the number of AAPI voters reached, APEN Action, a 501(c)(4) organization, was formed in 2011 dedicated to educating and building the power of AAPI voters in California.

Most importantly, the campaign helped APEN and our allies to create a national narrative for our local and state work that redirects the U.S. economy to a low-carbon, just, green, and inclusive direction.

### Building a Twenty-First-Century Environmental Movement: Implications for AAPIs and an Equitable Environmental Future

Actively developing a base of support among people of color—the majority of the state’s population—for clean, renewable, solar energy is necessary to ensure state decision makers advance bold policies and beat back opposition from entrenched interests.

By moving aggressively toward clean energy, California’s policies have the potential to significantly reduce these harmful emissions. Moreover, because policies adopted in California frequently lead the way for similar progress in other states and on the federal level, what we achieve here will undoubtedly create a positive ripple effect that will extend far beyond the state’s borders.

Convincing state decision makers to embrace bold, clean energy and prosolar policies will not be easy. While California’s Governor Brown has set ambitious goals, opposition from the coal and oil industries, as well as from utility companies, will be strong. The attempts earlier this year to exploit the folding of Solyndra demonstrated the eagerness of these industries and their political allies to undermine enthusiasm for solar power.

Shifting the traditional and mainstream environmental organizations and funders is also a challenge. At the annual meeting of the Climate and Energy Funders Group in April 2011, environmental philanthropists debated what to do next after failing to pass a national climate and energy policy despite a massive investment of resources. David Axelrod, former Senior Advisor to President Barack Obama, acknowledged the disappointment felt by the big donors in the room, claimed the president was still committed to the issue, and complained that the environmental groups and



funders had to do more to build broader political support. Others were blunter arguing that the term *climate change* and that the cap-and-trade bill did not warrant the president's attention because environmental groups never had the support for it to pass.<sup>9</sup>

While funders and mainstream environmentalists discussed the need to build power and a stronger environmental movement, there was very little understanding of how power and movements are actually built. Suggestions still favored top-down approaches and policy advocacy strategies, with the addition of new constituencies funded to make the demands for climate action and sustainability. Some talked about needing more "rural Americans" while others mentioned needing a movement of small businesses and business councils. Others talked about funding economic development organizations to be part of climate activism to bring the question of jobs and economy more central to the debate.

What was missing in the discussions was acknowledgment about what was working: a growing landscape of climate activism where community-based groups were organizing in low-income communities and communities of color and had strung together a series of victories that resulted in significant decreases in greenhouse gases and demonstrated a path to a sustainable future. Although these organizations were winning significant victories with minimal resources and building a movement step-by-step, person-by-person, there was little acknowledgment of this long history of on-the-ground work and of the strategies of movement building and power building that are already central strategies in the fight against climate change and for sustainable communities. These recent campaigns and demographic trends show that investing in organizing, movement building, and power building in low-income communities and communities of color is not only the right thing to do—winning requires it.

Despite the fact that the mainstream environmental movement has largely ignored people of color, polling and survey data and the work of organizations like APEN has shown that people of color are among the strongest environmentalists. Across a range of environmental and climate issues, people of color believe in stronger government action and are willing to pay increases in taxes in order to pay for certain environment and climate-related initiatives, such as support for renewable energy development. Given the demographic changes nationally, this environmental proclivity cannot



be ignored. In the last decade, 92 percent of the net U.S. population growth came from people of color and, surprisingly, Asians are the fastest-growing racial group. According to the 2010 Census, the Asian American population in the United States grew 46 percent between 2000 and 2010, faster than even Latinos, who saw a 43 percent growth in population. African Americans grew by 15 percent, while the white population only grew by 1 percent. Among the largest one hundred metropolitan regions, the white population declined in forty metropolitan regions, while the Latino population grew in all of them, and the Asian population increased in almost all of them. Surprisingly, while large Asian American communities in California, Texas, New York, and New Jersey continue to grow, the fastest growth over the past decade occurred in less established communities like Nevada, Arizona, North Carolina, and Georgia.

APEN's experience organizing for environmental justice illustrates strategies for building AAPI political power for environmental change. Integrating electoral organizing with community organizing defined by an environmental justice frame, APEN leveraged lessons from Proposition 23 to engage AAPI voters in a range of state initiatives in the November 2012 elections. APEN Action educated and mobilized tens of thousands of Asian immigrant voters in their native languages on key ballot issues statewide, including Proposition 39, a measure to close corporate loopholes to increase funding for clean energy; Proposition 30, the initiative to temporarily increase taxes to fund public schools; and Proposition 32, the deceptive measure to prevent workers from allowing their union dues to be used in political campaigns. With its partners MIV Action and 18 Million Rising, APEN published the first-ever statewide Asian voter guide in five different languages with more than twenty-two participating AAPI organizations. APEN Action developed a field program that mobilized voters on Election Day. The result: Proposition 39 passed overwhelmingly with 77 percent of AAPIs supporting and only 14 percent opposing; Proposition 30 passed with a 3.9 percent margin, with 61 percent of AAPIs supporting and 39 percent opposing<sup>10</sup>; and Proposition 32 was soundly defeated. Although detailed voting data is not yet available, postelection results show that the AAPI share of voters in California grew from 6 percent in 2008 to 11 percent in 2012, a five-point increase of the total electorate in four years. Further, AAPI support for President Obama grew from 64 percent in 2008 to 79 percent in 2012 in California (+15).

Engaging AAPI voters together with a community base of members has begun to tap a progressive AAPI voter base to move progressive policies in California. Much more needs to be done. The surge in AAPI voters in California illustrates the strategic need to engage AAPI voters, but it also requires sustained community organizing that engages voters over time in order to build long-term commitment and leadership to environmental and other progressive issues. The challenges are daunting: we face the most tumultuous political environment that the United States has seen since the 1960s alongside the most dangerous and volatile economic environment we have seen since the 1930s. Communities of all socioeconomic strata have been battered by the home mortgage crisis, face unstable but ever-rising fuel costs, and a meltdown in the financial sector that still is locking up capital markets. Job losses, income disparities, and carbon dioxide emissions continue to go up.

Looking forward, APEN recognizes the need to transform our economy and society to address climate change and inequality. We need bold, holistic, and comprehensive strategies that begin reversing current trends while developing a future that is environmentally sustainable and socially just. Such a massive and monumental transformation of our economy should not give economic opportunities and benefits only to the few. Instead, the greening of the U.S. economy must be consciously designed to include and lift up people of all classes and cultures in our society, especially those impacted by the last century's pollution-based economy. APEN's work in AAPI communities represents important approaches for building a stronger environmental movement within AAPI communities, but it also illustrates how AAPI communities can lead the environmental movement in the future. Building on the existing work of community-based organizing and tapping the demographic transition underway is central to any comprehensive strategy to combat climate change, accelerate the development of an equitable clean energy economy, and ensure a livable planet for generations to come.

*Authors' Note:*

Valuable Resources on Community Organizing and Proposition 2

For an excellent case study on Communities United and lessons for funders, please see the September 2011 white paper produced by Funders Network on Transforming the Global Economy, "A Perfect Storm: Lessons from the Defeat of Proposition 23" [http://www.fntg.org/documents/Prop23CaseStudy\\_000.pdf](http://www.fntg.org/documents/Prop23CaseStudy_000.pdf) (accessed 12/3/2013).

Also, for a moving and timely nine-minute documentary about the campaign and its implications for climate activism, please watch, *Where We Live: The Changing Face of Climate Activism* <http://wherewelivefilm.org/> (accessed 12/3/2013).

## Notes

1. Alston, Dana. 1991. "The Summit: Transforming a Movement." *Race Poverty & Environment* 2(3-4).
2. Lee, Charles. 1993. "Beyond Toxic Wastes and Race." *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, ed. Robert D. Bullard. Boston: South End Press.
3. For an in-depth case analysis of the LOP, see Bindi Shah's work, particularly her 2012 book, *Laotian Daughters: Working toward Community, Belonging, and Environmental Justice*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. See also, Bullard, Robert D., Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres. 2011. *Environmental Health and Racial Equity in the United States: Building Environmentally Just, Sustainable, and Livable Communities*. Washington, DC: APHA Press; Corburn, Jason. 2009. *Toward the Healthy City: People, Places, and the Politics of Urban Planning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; and Trinh-Shevrin, Chau, Nadia Shilpi Islam, and Mariano Jose Rey. 2009. *Asian American Communities and Health: Context, Research, Policy, and Action*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.
4. For further discussion of APEN organizing in Oakland and Richmond, see Shah, *Laotian Daughters*, Bullard et al., *Environmental Health and Racial Equity in the United States*, and Corburn, *Toward the Healthy City*.
5. California League of Conservation Voters. 2009. *Asian American Environmentalists: An Untapped Power for Change in California*. Los Angeles: California League of Conservation Voters.
6. Baldassare, Mark, Dean Bonner, Sonja Petek, and Jui Shrestha. 2011. *PPIC Statewide Survey of Californians and the Environment*. Public Policy Institute of California, July. <http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=993> (accessed 12/3/2013).
7. The California Environmental Justice Alliance is a statewide coalition of grassroots, environmental justice organizations made up of APEN, Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, Environmental Health Coalition, and People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights (PODER).
8. Baldassare, Mark, Dean Bonner, Sonja Petek, and Nicole Willcoxon. 2010. *PPIC Statewide Survey of Californians and the Environment*. Public Policy Institute of California, July. [http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/survey/S\\_710MBS.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/survey/S_710MBS.pdf) (accessed 12/3/2013).
9. Samuelsohn, Darren. 2011. "Green Donors Taking Time to Soul

Search." *Politico*. May 31. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0511/55980.html> (accessed 12/3/2013).

10. "Young Voters Turned the Tide for Brown's Prop 30." 2012. *Mercury News*. November 11. [http://www.mercurynews.com/education/ci\\_21976176/young-voters-turned-tide-browns-prop-30](http://www.mercurynews.com/education/ci_21976176/young-voters-turned-tide-browns-prop-30) (accessed 12/3/2013).

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