

Proposition 22 By LeRoy Chatfield

Jerry Brown says, “I’m not God!”

In the course of the United Farm Workers’ statewide political campaign to defeat Proposition 22, an agribusiness-sponsored initiative on the California ballot in 1972, we discovered that voter-related fraud was used to qualify the initiative for the ballot. If we could prove fraud, then we thought it might be possible to have the initiative legally removed from the ballot.

The first evidence we found that something was wrong was the uniform feedback we received from our door-to-door campaign work in the Los Angeles precincts. At our daily strategy/report meetings, dozens of staff volunteers reported that they were told by people who had signed the petition that they had done so only because the petition circulators standing in front of Los Angeles supermarkets told them the purpose of the initiative was “to lower food prices.” In fact, many voters reported seeing a cardboard sign strapped across the top part of the petition that read, “Lower Food Prices.”

Because of these reports, I sent my wife, Bonnie, and a few volunteers to the Los Angeles County Registrar of Voters to examine some of the certified petitions. This was really a fishing expedition because none of us knew what, if anything, that such an examination might show. At the very least, I thought we might obtain the names and addresses of thousands of Los Angeles voters who had been duped by the “lower food prices” ploy so that we could contact them by mail and by phone before Election Day.

Bonnie came back from the registrar’s office with dozens of copies of signed petitions, but the names and addresses and signatures on the petition were all in the same handwriting. She said these copies were only the tip of the iceberg; there were thousands of certified petitions filled with names and addresses, and all with the same handwriting. It was obvious that the paid petition circulators had taken the voter registration rolls and simply transferred them onto the petitions, writing in their own hand the names and addresses and signatures of voters. Because the circulators were being paid for each signature gathered, this was the fastest and easiest way to earn money. There was no attempt at cleverness nor any effort made to hide the simplistic process they used, and each petition was signed by the circulator, stating under penalty of perjury that the petition had been properly circulated among voters. It is likely that hired petition circulators had been using this process for years and Proposition 22 was not an exception. It was a stunning discovery!

I immediately called our campaign offices in the other major cities—San Francisco, Oakland, Sacramento, San Jose, and San Diego—and asked them to review the certified petitions on file in the registrars’ offices in their counties. In less than 24 hours, we knew that tens of thousands of fraudulent signatures had been used to certify Proposition 22. But now what? With less than eight weeks before Election Day how could we prove it? And how could we effectively communicate this voter fraud to the public throughout the state without sounding like political sore losers? Even if we could prove it, so what? Would it make any difference in the election outcome or would it be simply viewed as one of those last-minute campaign accusations?

We made a plan. First, we would gather thousands of statements from voters whose names were on the certified petitions but who had not actually signed the petition. We would ask them to sign a statement, under penalty of perjury, that they had not signed the petition, and furthermore, they petitioned the secretary of state to remove their names from the petitions. Statement forms were prepared overnight, and hundreds of volunteers fanned out into the Los Angeles precincts to track down voters whose names had fraudulently been filed. In just three or four days, we had more than 500 statements signed, all under penalty of perjury, and more were coming in each day. Our campaign offices in the other cities also began to gather statements from duped voters. It was now time to meet with Secretary of State Jerry Brown, the only statewide office-holder who was a Democrat. In his 1970 campaign for office, he had used the slogan, "I marched with Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers." It was time to collect.

I had only talked with Jerry Brown once before, and that was by telephone. I forget the original purpose of the call, but I do remember shouting at him that he should not complain when farmworkers turned to him for help. Did he think they should turn to the likes of Governor Reagan, Lieutenant Governor Curb or Attorney General Younger, all staunchly conservative Republicans? I doubt I even waited for him to respond before I hung up.

Tom Quinn, Jerry's chief of staff, a young but brilliant campaign strategist in his own right, arranged the meeting with Jerry Brown. The meeting took place in a high-rise office building in Century City where Brown had his Southern California office. I invited Jerry Cohen and Art Torres to come with me. We brought with us a couple of boxes filled with the declarations of voters who swore their names had fraudulently been used to certify Proposition 22. Jerry Brown came into the meeting not at all confident he even wanted to be there, and after the introductions, he stayed in the background.

Tom Quinn took charge and I began to explain what had happened with the certified petitions, and that we needed help. But Jerry Brown broke in with a smart-ass remark to the effect that he wasn't God, what could he do with these campaign-type charges, and he proceeded in that fashion to discount any possible help he might be able to give. At this point I stood up and said, "This is a fucking waste of time, let's get out of here." Jerry and Art hesitated a minute, got out of their chairs, and started to gather up their files, when Tom stood up, extended his arms, and said in his friendly but firm Irish pol voice, "Now wait a minute, let's calm down here, let's sit down and see what we can do to help." I could sense his annoyance with Jerry's flip remarks, so I said, "Fine." The tone of the meeting had changed from how do we get rid of these guys without hurting ourselves politically to how can we help these guys and get something out of it. The clincher were the hundreds of declarations, all signed under penalty of perjury, that we brought with us. A signed declaration from a voter about election fraud was something objective and tangible, and over which a secretary of state had some jurisdiction.

The plan that Tom Quinn and Jerry Brown cooked up at the meeting was masterful. First, we were to gather at least a couple of hundred additional declarations, and then Jerry would call a press conference to announce that declarations alleging voter fraud had been brought to his attention. He would also say that he was officially turning these allegations over to the Los Angeles District Attorney, Joe Busch, to investigate and to bring criminal charges, if the results of his investigation warranted such action. In turn, Joe Busch would call a press conference to announce that he had received these allegations from the secretary of state, and he promised to open up a criminal investigation. In turn, Jerry Brown would announce to the press that Joe Busch had informed him that a complete investigation was under way, and he awaited the results.

Jerry Brown explained to us at the meeting that he really had done nothing except publicly hand off our request to the D.A.—a Republican who was running for re-election in a tight race—who would publicly announce he had received them, etc. It was all media smoke and mirrors, but it served the purpose of publicly smearing Proposition 22 in each of these ensuing press conferences. The culmination of Tom Quinn and Jerry Brown’s strategy came just three days before the general election when the *Los Angeles Times* headlines screamed “7 Indictments in Proposition 22” and the sub-headline read “Voter Fraud Used to Qualify Initiative.” (Or words to that effect.)

My Response to Paul Henggeler

Professor Paul Henggeler asked me: “How valuable was Chavez’s barnstorming in the Proposition 22 campaign?”

My response: An election campaign is about winning or losing. Every aspect of a political campaign contributes to victory or defeat. It is impossible to know for sure which particular tactic was the most definitive.

In the Proposition 22 campaign, Jerry Brown and Joe Busch played major roles in smearing the initiative with their allegations and indictments of fraud. Bonnie Chatfield’s discovery of voter fraud played a role; 30-second television commercials featuring a soft-spoken Cesar Chavez and the 60-second radio spots featuring Jack Nicholson and Warren Beatty played a role; Cesar’s 30-second TV commercial, which was thought to be impossible to book on the immensely popular Archie Bunker show, played a part; the human billboarding tactics used during the Los Angeles commute hours played a part; the grassroots campaign mounted in every major city in California played a part; the unabashed coverage afforded by the *Los Angeles Times* played a role; and Cesar’s barnstorming tour was yet another piece which made up the Proposition 22 campaign puzzle. Remember, Proposition 22 was a life-and-death struggle for the farmworkers’ movement in California; it was a political war, and no one is qualified, including me, the campaign director, to say who/what played the most valuable role. Winning campaigns are all of a piece.

The Human Billboards—1972

I had developed a Proposition 22 campaign tactic, which we called “human billboards.” Hundreds of union campaign volunteers were organized into squads of 50 or so, each carrying a placard approximately 2 by 3 feet in dimension. All were identical—white block lettering on black—except for the message. These stark looking “billboards” carried such messages as: “LA Times Says No On 22,” “AFL-CIO Says No on 22,” “Council of Churches Says No on 22” and on and on.

We started the human billboards in the last two weeks of the campaign. Our squads were deployed in the early morning (6:30 to 8:30 a.m.) to the major feeder freeway entrances in San Fernando Valley, Santa Monica, San Gabriel Valley, etc. By placing each human billboard 10 yards apart we were able to cover three or four city blocks on both sides of the street that led to the major freeway entrances. And then in the afternoon (3:30 to 5:30 p.m.) we reversed the process by deploying our forces at major entrances from Central Los Angeles to catch the commuters leaving work at the end of the day to drive back to the suburbs. The goal of each human billboard was to make friendly

eye and hand contact with the driver of the car and point to his or her billboard. The effect was sensational! Commuters were honking their horns and waving their approval. The radio and TV traffic helicopters and planes picked it up and rolled it on the air during the morning and evening drive times, updating the commuters where the farmworker human billboards were located and why they were out there on the streets waving and “talking” to the commuters. Those of you who are not familiar with California campaigns have to appreciate that the L.A. media market reaches 56 percent of the state vote. This meant that the farmworker human billboards were reaching an audience from Santa Barbara in the north to San Bernardino and Riverside in the south. Thousands of dollars of free and sympathetic advertising.

One Sunday right before the election we brought all the billboard squads together and completely surrounded (10 yards apart) the Memorial Coliseum for three hours before the L.A. Rams football game, which probably drew 80,000 spectators. By this time almost all of the football fans in L.A. knew what these human billboards were and why they were there. This time, however, our human billboards were to remain silent. It had a powerful and sobering effect on the thousands of people who had to pass through these billboard lines. Once again, the media picked it up and rolled it out.

Taking the Blame

Fortunately for me, I was not one of the key volunteers who needed to be pushed out of the farmworker movement. I left long before I wore out my welcome. But had I stayed, and I certainly had the opportunity to do so, the time would certainly have come when my personal priorities would have clashed with the needs of the movement, and I would be out, friend or no friend of Cesar Chavez.

I do not deserve much credit for my voluntary departure, because I had a foreshadowing of what lay ahead for me. After Cesar’s funeral in 1993, I wrote a manuscript, which I entitled “Cesar, 1968.” In this document, I recount a conversation Cesar and I had late in the evening the night before the 1972 California general election, an election which would determine the fate of Proposition 22, the anti-union initiative sponsored by California agribusiness to outlaw farm labor unions. I wrote, “So there we were, just Cesar and me, sitting in the big open room of our ‘No on 22’ campaign headquarters looking out onto Olympic Boulevard five stories below. It was very late in the evening, everyone had gone home or back to our farmworker encampment at Lincoln Park to get some rest for another early morning of human billboarding and our ‘Get Out the Vote’ drive. Cesar was tired, and very nervous about the upcoming election. I was very uptight myself, and wondered if there was any last-minute campaigning that we could do. Just a few days before, with the help of our Hollywood media contacts, I had been able to arrange for a 30-second ‘Cesar No on 22 spot’ to be aired on the Archie Bunker show. It was very expensive, I forget how much, but all the media experts said it was worth it, and a coup to even break into the show. I remember being afraid to blink for fear I would miss it.

Cesar spoke very softly with a friendly but nervous edge to his voice. He simply explained to me that if we lost the election tomorrow, I would have to take the blame. I couldn’t answer. I was totally silenced by the harsh reality of what he had said. I was completely helpless. My closest friend, almost nine years now, had just explained the political facts of life to me. I had worked on this life and

death campaign full-time since July, barely had any time to even see Bonnie and the girls, unless she was in the office working. I worked very late into the night plotting strategy on the telephone with my staff directors in other California cities, and then worrying half to death about everything because of the high stakes involved for Cesar and his farmworker union. Now, to top it all off, I was expected to play the role of a fall guy, the person responsible for this historical defeat. I didn't answer Cesar. I just nodded and gave a shrug of the shoulders.

The union won! Proposition 22 was defeated 58% to 42%. (Nixon beat McGovern 54% to 40%). I did not feel like coming to the victory celebration because I am very uncomfortable at those kinds of events, but I did make an appearance at the tail end of the party. But everyone was pretty drunk by that time, and thank God, all of the speeches were over. I didn't have to stay long.

Cesar tried to make it up to me. The farmworker union had a big 'Welcome Home/Thank You' dinner party in my honor for all the staff and their families at La Paz. There was a banner in the dining room that called me a 'Giant Killer,' and Cesar made a big to-do about my work in the campaign and how I saved the union from the power of the growers." But I was mature enough to know that just because Proposition 22 had been defeated, it made me no more a 'Giant Killer' than, had it won, I would have been the person to blame. Winning or losing Proposition 22 wasn't about me, or my friendship with Cesar, it was about him and his relationship with his vision, his farmworker movement. That was the only thing that mattered.

I remember this incident as clearly today as if it happened last night. And I'm grateful that it happened, because it helped to spare me from the day, which surely would have come, when Cesar and I would have been forced to part company. I did not leave the farmworker movement because of this incident, but it certainly helped to lay the groundwork for my voluntary departure the following year.

The conversation that evening, high above Olympic Boulevard, reminded me again that this was not my cause, I had only come to the farmworker movement to help Cesar with his cause. The most difficult part of my decision to leave was the keen realization that I would have to give up my 10-year friendship with Cesar Chavez. Because of his all-consuming commitment to the cause of the farmworkers, he would no longer be a close friend. I knew it, I understood it, and I accepted the consequences of my decision. I felt a great sense of loss, and still do.