

# Opponents of race-based preferences at crossroads

By Amy Wood

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On the federal level, several anti-affirmative action bills have been killed by leading Republicans, signaling that the GOP doesn't want to take the issue head-on in an election year.

John Miller, vice-president of the Center for Equal Opportunity, a conservative Washington, D.C., think-tank, said "the anti-preference movement is at a standstill."

When not avoiding the issue, Republicans are dealing with it delicately.

In Michigan, Rep. Michelle McManus's two bills (HB 4457 and HB 4459) would only require that public affirmative action policies be reviewed by the state Civil Rights Commission in order to ensure that they conform to recent Supreme Court decisions, as opposed to the joint resolution put forward by her more conservative colleague, David Jaye, which would eliminate affirmative action all together. Although a spokesperson for McManus said that he and Jaye worked together to push these bills, he added that "we are not really confident that we need to eliminate affirmative action everywhere."

"Compromise bills," proposed to stimulate anti-affirmative action activity, have had an unintended effect: dividing Republican support.

One alternative Republicans are pondering is appealing to the public through grassroots methods, much as Ward Connerly did. Connerly founded the American Civil Rights Institute and its grassroots network the American Civil Rights Coalition and spearheaded California's Proposition 209 campaign which eliminated preferences in admissions and government contracts.

Other states have been slow to go along.

Today, only Washington seems poised to overturn affirmative action through the 1998 ballot. Initiative 200 received 280,000 signatures, topping the requirement by more than 100,000 signatures.

In the last two years, initiative drives begun in Colorado, Illinois and Florida have failed to obtain enough signatures to make it onto the ballot. An initiative drive in Ohio is still in its earliest stage; organizers need 335,000 signatures to qualify for the November ballot.

Only 24 states even allow initiatives, and the ACRI admits that in many of these states affirmative action is not a burning topic.

"We can't take this issue to Wyoming," said the ACRI's Ann Kramer, "It's not going to be sold nationwide."

So affirmative action opponents are looking to states who have had success fighting race-based preferences; states like Washington, and are using people like Steve Forbes and Bill Bennett — both offered free publicity — to spread their message.

Washington State affirmative action proponents know they have a big battle ahead. The NAACP has formed a coalition with a cross-section of minority and women's groups across the state that is trying to educate the voters in Washington about the intent of the so-called "Civil Rights Initiative." They won a small victory by revealing that the initiative campaign had duped some African American volunteers into thinking they were working for a civil rights cause.

Experiences in Colorado and Florida demonstrate that initiatives can be defeated.

Affirmative action in Florida is, for now, relatively secure, largely due to coalition efforts swaying public opinion in its favor.

Members of the Colorado Progressive Coalition, based in Denver, credit the defeat of last year's anti-affirmative action bills to rally a ground swell of support.

According to activist Soyun Park, "We were able to kill those bills because we didn't just

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hold a press conference, but we held press conferences along with rallies and other grassroots efforts—phone calls and letters."

Bill Vandenberg, of the Colorado Coalition, said rallying outside the capital, attending committee meetings, tapping support from local businesses, labor organizers, community organizations and students and doing their homework also contributed to its victory.

The coalition has already mobilized a larger network, called Colorado Unity, comprise of minority, women's, and other progressive organizations across the state that will continue the education effort statewide.

On Martin Luther King Day, they launched a series of teach-ins and community forums on college campuses and within local communities.

Colorado Unity modeled its efforts a recent campaign in Houston. The Houston initiative, which sought to eliminate affirmative action in public hiring and contracting and won enough signatures to be on the Nov. 5 ballot, was defeated by a 54 percent to 44 percent margin. Pro-affirmative action coalition efforts rallied businesses, labor groups, women's groups, students and individuals.

The Houston coalition also had the public support of Mayor Bob Lanier, and the financial support of local and national businesses.

Affirmative action's immediate salvation might come from an unlikely source: the corporate world.

According to organizers of Florida's "Civil Rights Initiative," anti-affirmative action proponents can't get adequate financial support.

Former initiative chairman, Orlando businessman John Barry, said that although the drives net some donations from wealthy individuals, financial support from either the Republican Party or big businesses is often lacking.

California's Proposition 209 took off when the GOP came on board, providing one-quarter of the campaign's total funds. Free advertising and publicity have complemented the individual donations that have fueled Washington's initiative.

According to Florida and Washington organizers, businesses have not backed their campaigns because they fear losing customers.

But businesses are not necessarily neutral on the issue. They are not only reluctant to back anti-affirmative action campaigns for fear of customer boycotting, but they also realize that affirmative action, or at least its primary effect — diversity — is good for business.

The 1995 Federal Glass Ceiling Report found that affirmative action not only widens the "pool of talent" businesses can draw from in hiring, but also that businesses recognize that they need to reflect the diversity of the marketplace and its customers.

In Ohio, anti-affirmative action organizer B. J. Kresnye is hoping to circumvent the money problem by seeking support from state Republicans. Ohio is the only state with an initiative in the works and pending legislation in the state legislature.

Kresnye said he does not have the time, energy, or money to see this initiative all the way through to the ballot, adding that "no one has the ability to do what Ward Connerly did: devote heart and soul to the initiative."

Anti-affirmative action organizers in Florida face the same problem, receiving only lukewarm

support from Florida's Republican party. Although some Republican legislators and candidates, including Jeb Bush who is running for governor this year, are sympathetic to the goals of the initiative, they are reluctant to take a public stand.

A spokesperson from the Senate majority leader's office said that "affirmative action is just not an issue for Senate Republicans," adding that an anti-affirmative action initiative would not be as successful in Florida as in California because "Floridians just don't have the animosity they have in California."

Florida anti-affirmative action organizers are planning to regroup and try again in the year 2000.

The NAACP in Florida has already begun efforts to ensure affirmative action's survival in the state. To galvanize public support, they have formed a coalition with other minority groups and business leaders entitled FREE, or Floridians Representing Equity and Equality.

The purpose of FREE coalition is not to defeat the initiative. Said Larry Colleton, legal redress for the Florida NAACP: "Deep down we don't think this initiative is going anywhere ... but we are not going to throw caution to the wind either."

Florida NAACP Director Leon Russell agrees:

"We are not going to attack John Barry [original initiative organizer]... We're not going to give that initiative any publicity, instead we are going to present positive action."

Members' strategy is two-pronged. First, they have presented a proposal to the commission appointed to review the Florida Constitution (a revision that occurs every 20 years and is underway this year) which asks for an amendment allowing state agencies and Florida's political subdivisions to undertake affirmative action where there is evidence of the current effects of past discrimination. Second, FREE is organizing a signature campaign to get the constitutional amendment on the November 1998 ballot.

Russell estimates that such a campaign will cost \$1.5 million, an amount he says can be raised with corporate backing. FREE is proposing a pro-affirmative action initiative.

Ultimately, California may turn to be an anomaly.

Vicki Agler of Colorado believes state groups that would otherwise support anti-affirmative action initiatives are laying low because only a few states have similar plans.

"The reason [the Colorado initiative planners] are backing off," said Agler, "is because they don't want to be the only state."

If only one state works toward an initiative, they fear pro-affirmative action groups like the NAACP or the ACLU will pour all their resources into defeating that initiative.

By waiting until several states can pool together and put forward initiatives, anti-affirmative action groups can "diversify the resources of affirmative action supporters."

Whatever state-based movements may attempt, the battle over affirmative action also will continue to be fought in the courts.

Most recently, the Center for Individual Rights, which fought and won the Hopwood case in Texas in 1995 — which banned affirmative action in University of Texas admissions — has brought suit on behalf of two white students against the University of Michigan's affirmative action admissions policies.

And in 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld California's Proposition 209 and earlier refused to hear the Hopwood appeal. The justices had decided to hear Piscataway versus Taxman, which involved the decision to fire a White teacher over black teacher in the Piscataway, New Jersey, school system, but a settlement by the parties and major civil rights organizations removed the case from their docket.

The current state-by-state situation demonstrates that affirmative action opponents do not constitute a great tide sweeping the nation, precisely because they are not reflecting public opinion.

Lawmakers and pressure groups who are pushing to end affirmative action are facing stumbling blocks, not only from Democrats but from many Republicans as well as from businesses who do not want to alienate their public, and from voters who want to retain affirmative action or at least its effects of diversity and equity.

As Brian Komar of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights explains, "It is clear there is broad enough support among the American public to block or defeat extreme efforts seeking to eliminate affirmative action programs for women and people of color. It is unfair that current coverage does not reflect this reality."

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## Soccer

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play in the Premier league, were not very impressive when the Jamaicans placed fourth in the Concacaf Gold Cup.

Their performance prompted calls from fans who insisted Simoes and the Jamaica Football Federation give hometown players first choice at places in the squad. But the Brazilian has stuck to his guns.

"I try to do everything with criteria and I discuss all of this with my experienced players. It has worked so far," he wrote recently in the press.

As popular as Simoes has become since the team's qualification, he is not without his critics. His taskmaster's style has been described as autocratic, a charge that has been fueled by his much-publicized run-ins with

star striker Walter Boyd.

Boyd, just as popular as the coach, was the star of Jamaica's preliminary round showing. His differences with Simoes have gained national notoriety and his constant omission from the squad in recent times has seen Simoes losing favor in some quarters.

But the Brazilian coach has endured pressure from the Jamaican public since he first arrived in the country in 1994 on an agreement with his government.

Though the latest incident is certain to haunt the Reggae Boys until the final squad for France is named, Simoes says his team will not be distracted and is confident they will create surprises in the World Cup. "Watch out, Michel Platini, we are going to shake your country," he wrote recently.

