

Student vote may have rescued Boulder municipalization

New Era Colorado registered 2,075 people in promoting ballot issue 2L

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Posted: Sat Nov 11 11:50:42 MST 2017

New Era Colorado's influence

The political group, which works primarily with young voters, reported significant get-out-the-vote efforts in Boulder. The work they did throughout the fall, and particularly on Election Day, has been credited by some with helping pass Issue 2L, which overcame a 12-point deficit last week to win by about 1,000 votes. According to New Era staff, the group's work in Boulder included:

- 428 rides to the voting center at the University of Colorado
- 2,075 voter registrations
- 21,000 text messages to voters

Cody Jackson, a senior at the University of Colorado, wasn't planning to vote in Boulder's latest election until he was approached outside the University Memorial Center two hours before polls closed on Tuesday, by a volunteer with New Era Colorado.

"They told me, 'Hey, if you want to vote, we can drive you there. It'll be super quick, and there's free pizza'," Jackson said. "I was like, 'OK, I have nothing better to do. I can do that.'"

And so he boarded a big van, where he saw three other students he knew and a couple dozen he didn't know, and a cooler with drinks.

On the ride over, volunteers with New Era — a group focused on advocacy and civic engagement, run by and for young people — told Jackson about ballot measure 2L, a proposed extension of the tax that funds Boulder's ongoing bid to separate from Xcel Energy and form a city-run electric utility.

"They emphasized that Xcel is sort of robbing people from opportunities to really support sustainable energy," Jackson said.

By the time the van reached the voting center at CU's Environmental Health and Safety Center, Jackson was sold. He stood with other students in a line that stretched out the door, and cast his vote for 2L.

On Thursday he expressed gratitude for the way he'd been treated by New Era, and for the help the group offered to both get him to the polls and to learn more about Boulder's utility effort.

"I felt pampered," he said. "It was amazing."

Jackson's vote played a small part in the surge of support for 2L, which was losing by 12 points for much of Tuesday night, then mounted a gradual comeback that ended with a [3.5-point win](#) by midday Wednesday.

There's a lot of election-related data that won't be released until the final unofficial count is announced Wednesday, but this much is clear: Those who cast their ballots early — a disproportionately older crowd, according to age breakdowns provided by the county clerk — strongly rejected municipalization, while those who mailed their ballots on the later end, or voted in person on Election Day, strongly supported it.

And, as was the case during the narrow municipalization vote of 2011, outreach by New Era to younger voters is being widely credited with tipping the election.

Muni was New Era's sole focus

Early estimates indicate that about 22 percent of Boulder's total vote share this election came from people between the ages of 18 and 34. That's only a little short of the statewide share for that age range in the 2016 presidential election.

Even when additional data is released, it'll be difficult to prove that New Era was indeed the difference, but in an election that was decided by about 1,000 votes, it's obvious that the group's efforts were at least a major factor.

Lizzy Stephan, New Era's executive director, said the group registered 2,075 people, from whom they secured "pledges" for 2L votes.

New Era, she said, also gave 428 van rides to the voting center, sent 21,000 text messages to voters and, starting in August, put in countless hours of in-person voter contact, both on campus and elsewhere in the community.

New Era didn't do any outreach about individual candidates or other Boulder ballot issues, Stephan said. They were focused exclusively on municipalization.

In the final 24 hours of the election, during which Boulder's response to 2L flipped from emphatic rejection to decisive approval, "We didn't leave any stone unturned," Stephan said.

"It's really clear that our efforts to register and engage young people are paying off."

New Era does work year-round and throughout Colorado, but in Boulder, their most significant impact in recent years has been around the issue of municipalization, which turns out to be a fairly easy sell on students.

"One thing we're increasingly realizing about young voters in the muni fight is that they're very suspicious of money in politics and very suspicious of large corporations," Stephan said. "So right away, talking to a young person and explaining Xcel's involvement in this fight — it doesn't take a lot of convincing."

See, for example, the case of Julia Redlinger, a CU freshman who said she was contacted about five times on campus by New Era volunteers before deciding to stop and hear them out.

"I didn't know anything about (2L) before that," she said, "and then they told us they're trying to get away from coal and more conservative energy things, and just to make Boulder, as a community, healthier."

Last week, she proudly cast her vote for the measure.

"I'm kind of a hippie," she said. "I like clean air."

Interviews with more than 50 CU students on Friday revealed that almost none of them knew anything about municipalization a few weeks ago. Most said they either voted in a different city or didn't vote at all, but the dozen or so who cast ballots in Boulder shared reasoning similar to Redlinger's.

Asked to weigh in on various details of municipalization, most came up empty.

"I think it was about electricity?" said freshman Isaac Prieto, who voted for 2L. "They were trying to make it all solar, or something like that."

But they're passionate about fighting climate change, the students explained, and were happy to support Boulder's effort to ditch Xcel in the interest of more aggressive action and greater emphasis on renewable energy sources.

"I wanted to help the environment," Prieto said.

No competition

The most common case against municipalization, at this point, is that the effort is no longer practical. No prominent opponents have demonstrated disinterest in fighting climate change, but have rather maintained that Boulder can take more meaningful action by partnering with Xcel and other cities.

In the process, the argument goes, Boulder could save, or reallocate, the millions of dollars it spends every year on staff work and legal fees for a project that, even in the best-case scenario, won't result in an actual operational city utility for several years. Even then, Boulder would likely be buying power back from Xcel for another several years, meaning that the city might not be controlling its own portfolio of renewables until a decade from now.

Some CU students said in interviews that this argument, centering on points of pragmatism and fiscal responsibility, did not compel them. But many more said they never heard it at all.

That's probably because the on-campus campaigning this fall was done almost entirely by New Era. Among all the students interviewed, a couple said they'd been contacted by Eric Budd — the City Council candidate who targeted young voters, but fell short on Tuesday — but not a single one of them said any other candidate or citizen organization reached out.

That left New Era, which had a pitch on 2L that was already attractive to many CU students, with virtually no competition this election.

There was only one group that spent money opposing 2L this year, and it was led by Councilman Bob Yates, ex-Mayor Will Toor and ex-Councilman Andy Schultheiss. Asked why the group, No On 2L, didn't do any outreach with younger voters, Toor explained that his committee didn't do any on-the-ground campaigning at all — at CU or otherwise.

"There was not a really extensive campaign effort around 2L from our side," Toor said. "I would describe it more that those of us who felt that there was a better path forward to meet our climate goals felt like it was important to make that case, but we really did not organize a large campaign."

Instead, the group sent some mailers, put together a website and hoped things swung their way in the election.

But even if No On 2L, or anyone else, had taken a stab at engaging young voters, it's not clear that they ever put together a case remotely as appealing as the one supporters of municipalization were able to make.

"It's an uphill battle," Toor said, "because everybody wants to act on climate change, and there's an easy-to-understand message with voting for the muni: It's going to get us more renewables and let us meet our climate goals, and we can fight back against what the Trump administration is doing. That's a very powerful message."

And, as Stephan said, students didn't seem to need much convincing to buy into it.

Steve Fenberg, the state senator who used to run New Era, and was at the helm during the slim victory of 2011, said, "There's an advantage in communicating with young voters because they are much more supportive of aggressive (climate) action."

'Huge opportunity'

For those who might have pushed for anti-municipalization votes from young people, they'd not only have faced the challenge of lobbying against a side with an eco-friendly message, but they'd have had no specific alternative path on which to sell voters.

"It made this a really difficult conversation, that there was no agreement on the table about what you'd get with a partnership with Xcel," Toor said. "Instead, we were saying we thought there was an alternative, but I think you need to be able to say, 'Here's how.'"

"Absent details of that sort, I think it does become a very difficult case to make."

In any event, that case, "difficult" as it may have been, seems never to have reached most young voters in Boulder.

That, combined with New Era's efforts, may have been the difference. The 2L vote margin stands at 1,031, and New Era's registrations alone were double that figure. Surely the van rides and relentless in-person contacts also helped buoy municipalization.

The passage of 2L means that, barring an unexpected turn, citizens will once again get to vote on municipalization in a few years. In addition to approving 2L, Boulder also passed a measure guaranteeing a public "go/no-go" vote before the city issues bonds for what could be north of

\$200 million in costs associated with acquiring Xcel's local assets.

Ahead of that vote, and on a myriad of other Boulder political issues, Fenberg said local campaigns would do well to consider engaging a population that, for the most part, seems to have been largely ignored during this election season.

"If you weren't talking to young people, you missed a huge opportunity," Fenberg said. "There's a huge reservoir. The more you talk to them, the more they turn out."

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