



Cornell University
ILR School

Labor Research Review

Volume 1 | Number 22
Labor and Political Action

Article 10

1994

LRR Focus: Electoral Success in Michigan, It Takes More Than Money

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LRR Focus: Electoral Success in Michigan, It Takes More Than Money

Abstract

[Excerpt] It's said that money is the mother's milk of politics. But cash isn't all there is to it. By 1992, my local had achieved the lofty status as the No. 2 local union in raising dollars for the Active Ballot Club (ABC), the United Food and Commercial Workers' equivalent of the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE). Most of the money we raised for our candidates was spent on television ads and other slick media. Because we had never conducted a grassroots voter registration education get-out-the-vote campaign before, I question whether dollars spent on media actually motivated our members to go to the polls.

Keywords

organized labor, campaign finance, politics, election, Michigan

LRR FOCUS: Electoral Success in Michigan, It Takes More Than Money

It's said that money is the mother's milk of politics. But cash isn't all there is to it. By 1992, my local had achieved the lofty status as the No. 2 local union in raising dollars for the Active Ballot Club (ABC), the United Food and Commercial Workers' equivalent of the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE). Most of the money we raised for our candidates was spent on television ads and other slick media. Because we had never conducted a grassroots voter registration-education get-out-the-vote campaign before, I question whether dollars spent on media actually motivated our members to go to the polls.

We had our chance during a special election to fill a vacancy in Michigan's 65th District in the spring of 1993. Most of the 65th District is located in conservative, rural, Jackson County. Sixty percent of the county's registered voters are Republicans, who control 15 of the county's 17 township boards. Not great odds, but you play the hand you're dealt. The stakes were significant. The Republicans already controlled the state Senate and the governorship. A Republican win would maintain the 55-55 split produced by the last general election. If our candidate, County Treasurer Janet Rochefort, won the special election, the Democratic Party would regain control of the House.

We decided to expand on our normal practice of simply sending a check to our candidate, then mailing an endorsement letter to our members asking them to vote for Rochefort. A little more than 1,000 Local 951 members reside in the 65th District, and Rochefort thought 9,000 votes would be enough to win. In spite of the overwhelming odds against her, we knew that if we mobilized our membership, we would have a major impact.

The challenge we faced was, how do we effectively mobilize the membership? Remember, these folks weren't used to any type of grassroots, political initiative coming from their local union. We believed that if we could tie our members' and their families' self-interest into the campaign, we would overcome party barriers and apathy.

The key strategy was to identify potential "yes" and "undecided" voters, make sure they were registered to vote, and then ask them in as many ways as possible to vote for our endorsed candidate. We decided to use a simple three-part mobilization strategy:

- **Information:** Give the voter answers to the who, what, when, and where questions. *Who's* up for election? *What* are the issues? *When* do we register and vote? *Where* do we register and vote?

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- **Education:** Give the voter answers to the *why* questions. *Why* is this race so important? *Why* should I get involved?
 - **Action:** Take specific activities to reinforce the information and education segments of the strategy. In this case, the action desired was members' registering, voting, and working for Rochefort's campaign.

Mobilizing more than the political junkies within our ranks required a few basic components: a simple, focused theme; a smorgasbord of reasonable tasks to choose from; a willingness on the part of the local's leadership to ask *everyone* to participate in as many aspects of the campaign as possible; and a reward and recognition system. Since Rochefort's theme was "A Friend You Can Count On," we used it in all of our communications materials. We broke campaign support activities down into seven categories with specific minimum time commitments. To make people feel more comfortable, we produced a glossary to explain political jargon (i.e., "lit drops," "sweeps," "canvassing," "phone banks").

Want folks to register by a certain date? Offer everyone who does so entry into a drawing for dinners for two at the winners' favorite restaurant. Need campaign workers? Offer members the ability to earn points that can be cashed in for a variety of promotional items or gift certificates. The name of the game is to get and reward the behavior you want. Our goal was to create an informed, educated, active membership group that would provide meaningful support—ultimately, votes—to an endorsed candidate's political campaign.

June 29, 1993 will not go down in history as the date Michigan's 65th District voters forsook the Republican Party and returned control of the House to the Democrats. We lost the election. But did we lose in the long run? I don't think so. We forced our opponent to spend over a half a million dollars for a state House seat in a "safe" district. The normal 60 to 40 margin of victory for the incumbent was reduced to 52 to 46 (a third-party candidate got two percent).

More important, we identified, trained, and deployed 127 volunteers, many of whom had never participated in any program of the union. Some of them had never even voted before. We learned some important lessons about future grassroots campaign. Money is important in a campaign. But money does not necessarily translate into votes if you don't do the grunt work of one-on-one contact with union members. We're going to keep those lessons in mind, because this spring we have three special elections in the Michigan House of Representatives. The champagne is still on ice.

—Joe Crump

Joe is the President of United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 951 in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
