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Case Study: Chicago-The Barack Obama Campaign

By Toni Foulkes

A

CORN's history of nonpartisan electoral work (voter registration and voter turnout) and leadership development combined during the March, 2004 primary season to make a big difference in the level of participation of our communities in that important election.

ACORN is active in experimenting with methods of increasing voter participation in our low and moderate income communities in virtually every election. But in some elections we get to have our cake and eat it too: work on nonpartisan voter registration and GOTV, which also turns out to benefit the candidate that we hold dear.

The March primary was not particularly important for the presidential race, as Kerry was just in the process of clinching the Dem presidential nomination. But it was critical in the U.S. Senate race. On March 16th, State Senator Barack Obama won the right to represent the Democratic Party in the U.S. Senate campaign. Jack Ryan won the Republican nomination that day, but went on to self-destruct over sex club revelations in his divorce papers. Sen. Obama went on to keynote the Democratic Convention in July and was catapulted to the national stage. As Sen. Obama puts it, how did a skinny kid with a funny name become the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate, with 53% of the statewide Democratic vote in a seven-person field?



Obama started building the base years before. For instance, ACORN noticed him when he was organizing on the far south side of the city with the Developing Communities Project. He was a very good organizer. When he returned from law school, we asked him to help us with a lawsuit to challenge the state of Illinois' refusal to abide by the National Voting Rights Act, also known as motor voter. Allied only with the state of Mississippi, Illinois had been refusing to allow mass-based voter registration according to the new law. Obama took the case, known as ACORN vs. Edgar (the name of the Republican governor at the time) and we won. Obama then went on to run a voter registration project with Project VOTE in 1992 that made it possible for Carol Moseley Braun to win the Senate that year. Project VOTE delivered 50,000 newly registered voters in that campaign (ACORN delivered about 5000 of them).

Since then, we have invited Obama to our leadership training sessions to run the session on power every year, and, as a result, many of our newly developing leaders got to know him before he ever ran for office. Thus, it was natural for many of us to be active volunteers in his first campaign for State Senate and then his failed bid for

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U.S. Congress in 1996. By the time he ran for U.S. Senate, we were old friends. And along about early March, we started to see that the African-American community had made its move: when Sen. Obama's name was mentioned at our Southside Summit meeting with 700 people in attendance from three southside communities, the crowd went crazy. With about a week to go before the election, it was very clear how the African-American community would vote. But would they vote in high enough numbers?

It seemed to us that what Obama needed in the March primary was what we always work to deliver anyway: increased turnout in our ACORN communities. ACORN is active on the south and west sides of Chicago, in the south suburbs and on the east side of Springfield, the state capital. Most of the turf where we organize in is African American, with a growing Latino presence in Chicago's Little Village and the suburbs.

ACORN members were involved in three activities around the primary:

1) Block captains were identified, as early as the summer before the March primary, and provided with lists of registered and unregistered voters and voter registration materials. We attended trainings and accountability meetings to receive our materials and make plans to get the people registered. Then we came back to report on our progress. We also hired voter registrars in the final three weeks to work the supermarkets in our communities. By the February 17 voter registration deadline for the primary, ACORN had registered 12,984 new voters. This was an organizational best for us. (As of this writing, we have added over 27,000 new voters).

2) Block captains then went to work to turn out the vote. They were all volunteers until the last few days, when we received funding to pay some of our block captains in some precincts of the 24th ward (North Lawndale) and the 15th ward (West Englewood) to get out the vote on the last Saturday before the election and on election day.

3) In some precincts in the 15th ward, we were able to hire canvassers to work on voter turnout for a full two weeks before the election. Each canvasser worked two to three precincts during that time.

The results of this activity were very interesting, and mirror what Professor Donald Green of Yale University has found about voter turnout work: where we were able to run a crew of paid and supervised canvassers for two weeks before the election, we did very well. In those targeted ACORN precincts in the 15th ward, voter turnout improved by an average of 50% over the previous year's city election (the only other election since the redistricting). Citywide turnout increased by only 14% over the same election.

The way the canvassers approached each door was important. Instead of a speech about a candidate they engaged the potential voter in a conversation about the issues, relating their issues to the importance of voting, and moving them to a commitment to vote in the primary. In addition ACORN leaders were making the rounds talking to their neighbors about the election. I am proud to report that the combination of a paid canvass and my volunteer work was especially successful in turning out the vote in my two precincts (34 and 51). In those precincts we boosted turnout by 82% (precinct 34) and 90% (precinct 51) over the previous year's turnout. ACORN leader Denise Dixon again paired with an effective canvasser, increased turnout in her precinct by 131%. The best performing precincts were the ones with a canvasser and a leader who worked at least Election Day and the Saturday before. There is a noticeable difference between these precincts and those that only had a paid canvasser in it, who wasn't a local community leader.

We're not ready to prove anything yet with our data, because we have not run a scientific test, but we believe Green's results showing that door-to-door field work for two weeks before an election yields significant results, and we believe that there is a correlation with strong local leaders assisting the paid canvassing in winning even more dramatic increases.

The 24th ward has traditionally had higher voter turnout than in the 15th. The work leading up to the election in the 24th Ward was done by leaders who volunteered their time. Some were paid for two half days of door knocking, election day and the Saturday before. Turnout increased in ACORN precincts in the 24th ward at a rate higher than the city average, but not at the rate at which it increased in the 15th. Overall turnout was still higher in our 24th ward precincts than our 15th ward precincts, but the rate of increase was not as dramatic.

None of this is rocket science, but it is important. Good door-knocking by community residents for even two half days can impact turnout. Good door-knocking by paid and supervised canvassers for two weeks can have dramatic impact. And a combination of the two, especially with experienced community leaders working with the paid canvassers, can make a huge difference.

As it turned out, Obama won the primary handily, pulling white wards as well as African American. But no one knew that that would be the case. In each election we must act as if our work is critical for our communities. That is what we did in the primary, and we learned something in the process.

Toni Foulkes is a Chicago ACORN leader and a member of ACORN's National Association Board.

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