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A TALE of Two Elections

Political Science Professor Tari Renner breaks down his two mayoral campaigns and what they reveal about the changing face of local election politics.

By TARI RENNER

In 2009, I ran and lost the race for mayor of Bloomington. It was a hard-fought campaign, and our themes of creating a more open process for city governance seemed to resonate strongly with voters. It was also the closest election in the city's history. When the final tallies were announced two weeks after the election, we learned we had been defeated by 15 votes.

Fast-forward to June 4, 2012. At a news conference, I announced my intention to run again for mayor. I was motivated by a firm belief that my platform and its vision of economic progress and proactive leadership would benefit Bloomington and its 78,000 residents. Knowledge gleaned from three terms on the McLean County Board and as a political science scholar and professor also taught me that campaigns are won or lost not just on a compelling set of messages, but on the complex mechanics of running an effective campaign.

The contrasts between my two mayoral races are intriguing to contemplate and offer telling insights into the inner workings of a modern political campaign. This story examines a few of those contrasts. But from my perspective, the most memorable aspect of these campaigns were interactions with volunteers and staff. They included many Illinois Wesleyan alumni, students and employees who devoted time, energy and multiple talents to make a difference. These days it's tempting to be cynical about the state of American politics. But when a dedicated team collaborates to build a campaign, the process can be energizing, inspirational and (more times than you might think) a lot of fun.

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***Tari Renner in downtown Bloomington.
(Photo by Lori Ann Cook-Neisler)***

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Looking back at the 2009 and 2013 campaigns, the similarities are easy to spot. For one thing, they were three-way races that were technically non-partisan but had partisan overtones. Both were highly salient elections, receiving extensive local media coverage from the Bloomington *Pantagraph*, the Peoria-Bloomington television stations and local commercial and public radio stations. Further, in each election the combined total of all the candidates' paid messaging to voters broke previous spending records.



Renner's 2013 headquarters bustled with volunteer activity.

For our campaign, we used similar means of communicating with voters in both elections. These included an active field operation that went door-to-door, direct mailings to likely voters, radio ads and social media. Finally, there was extensive interest-group activity, including political-action committee contributions.

Among the differences between the two contests, the most important was that in 2009 there was an incumbent seeking re-election whom I ran against, while in 2013 the candidates were competing for an open seat. We also had more money in the 2013 contest and a much more extensive Get Out the Vote (GOTV) operation.

Another notable distinction in the second campaign was establishment of an official headquarters in downtown Bloomington. Having a physical campaign headquarters, open to the public, highlighted our theme of transparency. It also made all of us more productive. The headquarters was often bustling with activity as volunteers and IWU interns would gather to make phone calls, produce door-to-door walk sheets and perform many other duties.

In addition, we decided to hire a full-time paid staffer, Ted Delicath '13, for the last three months of the campaign. Volunteers are wonderful, but they do have their own lives and obligations. An all-volunteer operation is bound to have things that slip through the cracks. With Ted at the helm, there was a great deal of consistency to our operation. It didn't hurt that he is a gregarious workaholic — a quality I observed in Ted as a student in my classes and as a leader on Illinois Wesleyan's Student Senate.

Many involved in our 2013 effort had strong links to IWU. Krista (Vogel) Cardona '03 led our core management team, as she had done in 2009. Other key members were Scott Black '10; Kevin Gordon, a Titan in the class of '16; and Carlo Robustelli, who works for Illinois Wesleyan as director of grants and foundation relations. (To read more about this team, [read the sidebar story](#)).

Except for Carlo, these are all current or former students of mine, and I feel both pride and gratitude for being given the chance to work with them as peers along the campaign trail. Among their vital contributions was a savvy enthusiasm for using new technologies, especially social media, as a means to help achieve a near miracle in modern politics: getting lots of young people involved in a municipal campaign.

Proactive politics

In 2009, we maintained an official campaign website and Facebook page and sent out regular emails to supporters. But all those forms were ramped up greatly in 2013. Further, Krista Cardona arranged for a supporter to record video interviews with me on many subjects — open government, city infrastructure, downtown revitalization — that were posted on YouTube and linked from our web and Facebook pages.

These online efforts did not replace more traditional methods of communication with voters such as direct mail. But such methods cost money, and we were determined to be as efficient as possible. For example, our direct-mail pieces were targeted to households where someone voted in the previous city election, plus those who were regular primary election voters. In the final weeks of the campaign, we also saturated the airwaves with radio ads on the two major commercial news stations, WJBC and Cities 92.9. While listeners to these stations tend to be the most politically involved segment of the Bloomington electorate, the same does not apply to television, where a low percentage of those watching ads end up going out to cast their votes, making our decision to not buy TV time an easy one.



Renner and supporters joined in the patriotic spirit of a Labor Day parade through downtown Bloomington.

With the barrage of media advertising you see in a typical modern campaign, you may wonder why candidates still bother to go out to “shake hands and kiss babies.” The reason is because it works: nothing is more effective than personal contact with potential voters. While we held some “meet and greet” events in 2009, we were determined to be much more active on this front in our 2013 effort. We found hosts for more than 30 meet-and-greets in neighborhoods across the city. As well as engaging voters, these get-togethers proved to be an effective fundraising tool while reinforcing our campaign’s message of proactive leadership. They also made me a better candidate by giving me a clearer sense of the concerns of those whom I hoped to serve as mayor.

As it turned out, our campaign was not alone in getting messages out to city voters. A so-called “Super PAC” spent a large amount of money on our behalf. As I often discuss with my political science students, Super PACs don’t contribute directly to campaigns but rather spend money on candidates’ behalf. In national elections, this activity has increased dramatically since the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court Citizens United decision. What many don’t realize is how rapidly this Super PAC phenomenon has trickled down to highly salient local elections.

In our case, the Illinois State Board of Realtors developed and sent out four waves of direct mail to all registered voters in Bloomington, urging people to vote for “Tari Renner for Mayor.” It also paid for two waves of robocalls to “Vote Renner for Mayor on April 9th.” These paid messages cost over \$30,000 (more than our entire 2009 campaign budget). Since the Super PAC’s direct-mail pieces were similar to our campaign materials, many voters didn’t realize they came from another source. As one supporter told me: “Tari, your campaign is sending out so many mailers I need a separate mailbox just for your stuff!”

The final push

With the 2013 election drawing nearer, it became clear that our efforts — as well as successful performances in three public debates between the candidates — had created positive momentum. Public endorsements came from the Bloomington police officers, firefighters and public service workers, as well as the Association of Realtors and the Bloomington *Pantagraph*. The only major endorsement we didn’t garner was from the area Chamber of Commerce.

Further, two waves of polls from a Chicago firm showed our campaign had a double-digit lead, with more supporters than the other two candidates combined.

Despite these advantages, we remained nervous all the way up to election night. With memories of disappointment four years earlier, our team would not be lulled into thinking we could just ease up and coast across the finish line.

One week before the election, we began the final push in our GOTV operation. We were ready with a detailed, data-driven plan for action, with hundreds of volunteers enlisted to call voters, reminding them to vote on Election Day. We also had a proverbial “Berlin Air Lift” as Gretchen Grabowski ’03 came down from Chicago in the final days help us manage the call-banking volunteers.

Casual observers of politics may assume that Election-Day morning represents the “end” of campaigning, with candidates arriving bright and early to the polls, flashing confident smiles for the cameras as they cast their votes and then retreating until they assemble with supporters that evening to await results. In fact, our campaign headquarters opened at 5 a.m. and remained a buzz of activity for the next 13 hours. Volunteers scheduled for phone banking began their one-hour shifts at 9 a.m. Our headquarters, set up to accommodate some 40 volunteers, became filled beyond capacity. When the campaign’s core team called off the GOTV efforts at 6:15 p.m., many volunteers had to be convinced that, with the polls nearly closed, we had done all we could.

Throughout the day, the team also monitored reports from poll watchers in key districts and directed volunteers to call those who had not voted yet but previously indicated they planned to do so. Poll watchers were also enlisted to enter the vote totals as they were reported in each precinct. Because of that, we knew the results of the election after the first few returns came in. Just 30 minutes after the polls closed, we began to celebrate. It was an amazing contrast to the long days we waited for news on a final recount of votes in the previous election.



***Renner was sworn into office at City Hall.
(Photo by the Pantagraph/David Proeber)***

Ultimately, we won with nearly 52 percent of the total vote in a three-way race — nearly a 16-point margin — and expanded the electorate by more than 1,000 voters over the 2009 contest.

In the weeks and months since the election, I have been busy carrying out the promises we made in our campaign: increasing transparency and citizen involvement in City Hall, making our boards and commissions more representative of the community, revitalizing downtown Bloomington and fixing our infrastructure. I also continue teaching classes as a full-time member of the IWU faculty, where I can now offer students firsthand glimpses into the strategies that add up to a winning — or losing — campaign.

Looking back at election night, I feel a profound sense of awe and gratitude for those individuals who came together into a team that was truly more than the sum of its parts. I’ve never seen anything like it. The operation was run with Prussian-like efficiency and was remarkably creative in its approach to the use of social media, messaging, GOTV, developing events to maintain social cohesion and camaraderie, providing mutual emotional and moral support, responding to changing circumstances and even getting results on election night in real time.

Both elections were incredible experiences, but the 2013 race was a life-altering campaign for me and, I suspect, for others responsible for its success. Running for political office can be exhausting, even tedious at times. And once in office, one needs to accept that the changes envisioned as a candidate bear subject to the slowly grinding wheels of government bureaucracy. But what I know in my heart, and can convey to my students, is that the effort is worth it, if you

are up to the challenge and can assemble the right team. And it sure helps, I've discovered, if that team is wearing the Titan green.

Editor's note: Carlo Robustelli was a contributing writer for this story.

The author, Tari Renner, has been a political science professor at Illinois Wesleyan for 20 years — including 12 years as department chair. He received his Ph.D. and master's degree in political science from the School of Government and Public Administration at American University. In 2002 he received the University's highest award for teaching excellence. Prior to his election as mayor, Renner served three terms on the McLean County Board representing District 8 (Bloomington's West Side and Downtown). Among the classes he teaches at IWU are courses in American politics, public policy and empirical research methods, and he has published widely in those areas.

TO READ ABOUT THE ALUMNI LINKS TO RENNER'S CAMPAIGNS, [CLICK HERE.](#)

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