

**FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**  
**A Political Psychologists' Campaign for Office**

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**RESUMEN**

El autor, un veterano psicólogo político, volvió de la academia a la práctica en noviembre de 2002, cuando se presentó a las elecciones como candidato a la Cámara de Representantes de Maine. Al igual que su oponente republicano compitió bajo el sistema de *Clean Election Candidate*. Se analiza la estrategia de campaña que consistió fundamentalmente en pedir el voto puerta-a-puerta. Los resultados obtenidos se interpretan haciendo un análisis de la composición de los votantes del distrito (incluyó a 10 comunidades), y del otro candidato. Se plantea el papel importante que *el debate de las armas* tuvo en el resultado de la campaña. A pesar de la inferioridad inicial, 2:1 (Republicanos sobre Demócratas) en los ciudadanos registrados, el autor obtuvo el 46% de votos, mejorando así los resultados de los Demócratas en anteriores campañas legislativas del Distrito. Un aumento que se atribuye a la amplia campaña de puerta-a-puerta realizada.

**ABSTRACT**

The author, a long-time political psychologist, turned from theory to practice in November, 2002, when he stood for election as a candidate for the Maine House of Representatives. He ran as a publicly financed *Clean Election Candidate*, as did his Republican opponent. This presentation reviews the strategy of the campaign, which mainly involved door-to-door solicitation. Explanations for his loss involve an examination of the voter composition of the district (which included 10 communities), and the other candidate. The important role of the "*gun issue*" in the outcome of the campaign will be discussed. Despite the 2:1 handicap in registrations (Republican over Democrat), the author gained 46% of the vote, improving on previous Democratic legislative campaigns in the District. This improvement is attributed to the extensive door-to-door campaign.

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**Key words:** political campaign, strategy door-to-door, legislature in Maine

Small Constituency politics depend less on fund-raising and more on the voters' knowledge of and acquaintance with the candidates. All things being equal, the candidate who receives the most exposure receives the most votes, in accordance with Zajonc's (1968) "mere exposure" hypothesis. Schaffner, et al (1981) demonstrated this in an experiment with make-believe candidates whose names were posted in the town. Voters who were subsequently polled favored the candidates whose names were displayed

most often. Of course, money translates into advertising exposure and thus “mere exposure” works in actual congressional primary races as well (Grush, et al, 1978).

Of course, partisan preference and ideology enter into political outcomes as well. Some analysts today are concerned with the possibility of permanent one-party dominance as population shifts south and west and the incumbent president draws campaign contributions that dwarf those of his nine potential opponents put together. The present account of my legislative campaign reports an attempt to overcome the 2:1 Republican advantage in a district of east coastal Maine.

### **Background and motivation**

I began teaching social psychology after receiving my PhD from the University of Florida in 1963. Up to that time, my only political involvement had been in voting, except for student sit-ins to protest restaurant segregation. But in 1964 I worked as a Democrat to turn out voters for Lyndon Johnson against Barry Goldwater, and not long after found myself in opposition to the president I had helped elect. By 1967 I was deeply immersed in anti-war politics, and in the summer of 1968 I chaired the Maine Committee for Gene McCarthy and attended the fractious Chicago convention in that capacity.

After Nixon’s election in 1968, the Democratic Party began to address questions of access raised by the McCarthy and Kennedy supporters. In Maine, this concern led to the formation of the Mitchell Commission, chaired by the to-be Senate Majority Leader. I was appointed to the Commission, and helped to rewrite party rules. One political involvement led to another, and my professional writing was neglected.

In 1970, I proposed to turn my political involvements to professional use by writing a book on psychology and politics. On sabbatical leave, I undertook a year of study of the literature and began to write. The project came to fruition in 1974 with the Free Press publication of *The Psychology of Politics* (Stone, 1974).

I remained active in politics after that publication, but I’ll skip over those years before my retirement in 1997 to the small Maine seaside village of Prospect Harbor, in the town of Gouldsboro. I was soon an active member of the minority party in the town, and eventually became town Democratic Chair. I worked on seeking candidates and supported their losing campaigns for the legislature. In 2002, I made the rash promise that I would run myself if I couldn’t find a candidate. One prospective candidate decided to have a baby, another found that this wasn’t the time for her (she

would have had to give up her newspaper column). Thus it was that I found myself having to put up or shut up.

Two things made the race attractive: The absence of an incumbent (because of term limits), and the presence of Maine's Clean Election Law. The law nearly eliminated the chore of fund raising.

### **The Office: Representative to the Legislature in Maine**

Maine has a bicameral legislature, with 151 Representatives and 35 Senators. Because Maine's population center is Portland, the districts are small, geographically, in the South and West, and grow very large in the East and North. Although my county, Hancock, is one of the coastal growth areas that includes Bar Harbor, the districts still tend to include many towns. My district (District 132) included, in addition to my home town of Gouldsboro, eight other towns and one unincorporated township.

#### *The District and My Opponent*

The Maine House of Representatives has 150 voting members plus one nonvoting Native American Representative. The members are elected from geographical districts of approximately equal population (c. 8,500). The 10 communities that constituted District 132 had been represented by a Republican for eight years (the incumbent, having served four consecutive 2-year terms, was prohibited from running again by Maine's term limits law). House District 132 is strongly Republican, roughly 40% Republican, 20% Democratic, and 40% unenrolled voters. The only saving grace for a Democrat is that the voters of the district are strongly independent, having voted for Perot in 1992 by a margin of 38% to the first Bush's 32%, with Clinton bringing up to the rear with 30%. Redistricting this year, based on the 2000 census, changed the district slightly, but it remains 2-1 Republican. (The redistricting removed Trenton from the district, one of the two large towns that I won outright.)

My opponent, Earl Bierman, was an attractive 35-year-old man with three small children. After finishing a degree in political science, he had stayed in his home community, working as a teacher aide and then as a paid fireman at the Navy Base in Winter Harbor. He had lost the latter job when the base closed. It should be pointed out that both his father and his sister had worked at the base, so he had many local acquaintances. Bierman's main campaign appeal, stated in his announcement and subsequent newspaper ads, was that he had visited "ground zero" as a volunteer, helping rescue workers at the World Trade Center ruins. Although he never speci-

fied exactly what he did there, those two or three days at the site, had, he asserted, inspired him to public service.

### *Primary Campaign*

I was unopposed in the Democratic Primary, so my only obligation was to qualify for a place on the ballot by collecting signatures of 25 to 40 registered Democrats residing in the District. (Since signatures had to be checked by each Town Registrar, separate nomination papers must be collected by town). The primary allowed me, as a relative unknown (I had lived in the district only five years), to begin getting my name out by newspaper announcement and lawn signs. Of interest was the Republican primary that pitted a fellow townsman and friend, another retiree, against my eventual opponent from a neighboring town. The older man's campaign depended on a) his selection as a candidate chosen by the outgoing incumbent, and b) his work for several years as town planning board and budget committee chair. There was little debate or criticism during the campaign, but in conversation the older man did question how a young man with small children could cope on the legislator's salary of \$9000 a year.

### *The Maine Clean Election Law*

The Maine Clean Election Law provided that candidates for the State Senate and House of Representatives could receive public funds for their campaigns by raising qualifying contributions of \$5 each. In my case, this requirement was a minimum of \$250, or 50 checks made out to the Maine Clean Election Fund. Two thousand two was the second election cycle for "clean" candidates, and the option was popular. Seventy percent of those elected to the House chose the Clean Election option. Both my opponent and I were clean election candidates.

## **Campaign College: Help from the HDCC**

Following the primary in June, the campaign began slowly building momentum. One of the early events was a "campaign college" sponsored by the House Democratic Campaign Committee, to which all House candidates were invited. This day-long session in Augusta provided us with a comprehensive campaign strategy notebook, and gave us a chance to hear from veteran campaigners. The importance of door-to-door campaigning was stressed repeatedly. The Committee also outlined possibilities for on-going consultation and assistance with mailings.

### *District Support*

An early event in one of the four larger towns in the District allowed me to meet and talk with Democrats about the central issue of my campaign, my support for a single-payer health care plan under study by the legislature. This early promise of support, and that of people in other towns, did not materialize into significant help. I met people from various towns through door-to-door campaign and attendance at community events: town meetings, bean suppers, pancake breakfasts (but not turkey shoots).

### *Endorsements*

Many organizations send detailed questionnaires to the candidates, and one liberal group, the Dirigo Alliance, together with the local teacher's organization, actually interviewed the candidates. I was endorsed by the Maine AFL-CIO, NOW, Maine Education Association, Maine Fund for Animals, Maine Chapter of National Association of Social Workers, Dirigo Alliance, and the Maine Council of Senior Citizens. I doubt that such endorsements made much difference, and particularly in a predominantly conservative rural area I did not think it advisable for the organizations to publicise their endorsements except to their members. One group whose support is a plus in this area, the NRA, was not one of my endorsers.

### *Issues: Guns and Single-Payer Healthcare*

Health care issues were resonant – there seemed to be great interest in the single-payer healthcare plan that had been funded for study by the legislature. I featured this on my literature, and introduced it as my focal issue door-to-door. The reception was warm, excepting one gentleman who rejected single-payer health care as socialistic.

The gun issue is a hot one in rural Maine. The state passed, a few years ago, an amendment to the state constitution stating that the right to own guns shall never be abridged. I ran into the gun question several times, and cowardly muted my support for gun control (I am a member of the Brady group), and retreated into the assertion that the matter had been settled by the amendment's passage. Nevertheless, if you're not a card-carrying NRA member and avid hunter, you're suspect. My opponent cultivated the gun people; I was horrified to read that he had won the turkey shoot in Waltham, a town that I had spent a lot of time in. A few weeks later, another report in the paper; he had won the turkey shoot again. I lost badly in Waltham, 89 to 29.

### **Campaign strategy: Door-to-door and judicious use of \$4900**

My campaign budget was the amount allocated by the Clean Election Fund: \$622 for the primary campaign, and \$4255 for the General election (I returned \$199 unspent). I spent the money for signs, campaign cards, and newspaper ads in the last weeks. I had printed and distributed door-to-door 4000 cards (sample), reserving nearly half of my funds for two direct mailings of postcards designed by the Campaign Committee. The main emphasis was on stopping at each residence, talking briefly with the occupant, and leaving a card. When no one was at home, I wrote “sorry to miss you” on the card, and left it in the door.

My secret weapon was my “Bill Stones” – thought up and crafted by my wife Barbara. I carried a pocketful of smooth beach stones on which was printed in gold or silver calligraphy, “Bill.” The stones were real ice-breakers; few could suppress a smile when they realized the significance of the stone.

#### *Down to the Wire: The Last Weeks Before November 5*

During the last few weeks of the campaign, candidate activity increased. My newspaper ads appeared. There was no television advertising, given the low campaign expenditures. My opponent, who had campaigned lightly, relying on his local boy status, his young wife with babe in arms and two small children, and his “I was at ground zero” newspaper ads, began hitting the road. I was relying on the extensive door-to-door I had done over four or five months, handing out “palm cards” and “Bill Stones”, and on two mass mailings.

### **Election Day, November 5, 2002**

There is little organized party election day activity in rural Maine. In my hometown, some supporters did organize a poll-watching operation. This consisted of a rotation of pairs of poll watchers who recorded the name of each person who collected a ballot, so that in the late afternoon and early evening Democratic non-voters could be called and urged to vote before the polls closed at 8 PM.

One important pre-election day activity that made a difference was my opponent’s absentee ballot operation. An aide visited the town offices of each of the four largest towns weekly during the month that absentee ballots were available, to obtain the list of voters who had requested an absentee ballot to be mailed to them. Then the candidate telephoned or visited these voters, hopefully before they had mailed in their ballots.

To indicate the importance of absentee ballots, in Gouldsboro 100 of the 793 ballots cast were absentee. Besides those mailed or delivered to shut-ins, anyone could walk into the town office before Election Day, request and cast an absentee ballot.

An important strategy of my campaign was to make two mass mailings in the last weeks before the election. These mailings, which cost half my campaign budget, were organized by the House Democratic Campaign Committee, and were set pieces, postcards that contained the candidate's name and picture. The first mailing was a general Democratic position card, to arrive on October 9, four weeks before the November 5 election. The card featured economic issues. The second card, focused on health care, was to arrive on the Thursday before the Tuesday election. Unfortunately, these mailings did not arrive as scheduled, the first arrived the week before, the second did not reach all the communities, and when it did, arrived in a last-minute blizzard of campaign throw-away mail. This glitch was important, given the closeness of the election outcome. The House Committee blamed the printer/mailer firm; the firm blamed the Committee – a case of Murphy's law, I guess.

### **Math and Aftermath: 1675 to 1944**

When the counting was done, on election night, I had lost 1675 to 1944 (46% to 54%). In hindsight, there were all sorts of ways that the 270 vote spread could have been erased. I won my hometown, Gouldsboro, 406 (53%) to 363, and another of the four largest towns, Trenton, 280 (51%) to 271. The strongest Democratic candidate in recent years had polled only 44% in the district.

#### *Analysis*

Given the 2-1 Republican advantage in enrolments in the district, my 46% was not a bad showing. My face-to-face meeting with so many voters paid off (but not enough). As one Republican farmer said to me: "We don't get to meet many candidates. If no one else comes around, I'll vote for you."

My analysis also relates to the various communities. Winning Gouldsboro illustrates the "home town advantage." Trenton, where I won by 51%, was a different case. It is a growing bedroom community between Bar Harbor and Ellsworth, and is perhaps more open to my direct appeal than more stable communities. Also, I had developed a relationship with a key community group in Trenton, the volunteer fire department. Through frequent attendance at the fire department's pancake breakfasts over the Summer and Fall, I had become known to members of that key group. (Unfortu-

nately, should I run again, Trenton has been lost to my district in the re-districting based on population shifts).

### **Conclusion**

This experience of running for office has helped me to understand some of the dynamics of democratic elections. Our attention in political science and political psychology tends to be focused on congressional and presidential elections. My experience was that many voters tend to be emotionally attached to party, but were not really ideological. A friendly personal approach, together with follow-up letter or visit, often means more than party identification. A recent case in Maine of the importance of face-to-face campaigning is the story of John Eder, a Green party member elected to the house in 2002 from a district in Portland. He triumphed over the incumbent Democrat by intensive house to house campaigning. A fellow Representative from another Portland district said "I know people he knocked on three times. He knew the names of their dogs" (It's not easy...June 16, 2003). (The Democrats got even, however, by abolishing his district in the re-districting negotiations).

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