

TRAVEL Speaking Truth to Power by Campaign Strategy



Travel Tales By Llewellyn Toulmin

Last month I described the death threat I got while campaigning for Dr. Kim Schrier, Democrat in the state of Washington, running in the 8th Congressional District. In traveling to 147 of the 196 countries on Earth, and living overseas for eleven years, I had never before gotten an actual death threat. But that's life in our United States today.

Due to hard work by the candidate and her team, political novice Schrier beat her experienced opponent by a margin of 52.6 to 47.4 percent. So I am very pleased. But I think her margin could have been even bigger. This month I will lay out problems in campaign strategy and tactics, and next month I will describe my experiences in five other mid-terms.

I flew out to Washington state in mid-August 2018 at my own expense to work as a volunteer for Dr. Schrier, after searching the country for an excellent, progressive, Democratic female candidate. I made it clear before joining that I was keen to work 15 hours a day for 31 days, had managed two campaigns, and had worked in policy analysis for 45 years. However, instead of putting in over 400 hours, the campaign only allowed me to work about 80 hours. Huh?

It turned out that the campaign was not really set up to take in full-time volunteers, unless they were willing to make phone calls (with only a 10 percent hit rate) or go door-to-door (12 percent hit rate) all day. I could not perform those exhausting tasks more than a few hours per day. I volunteered to help with PR, fundraising, writing position papers or speeches, stuffing envelopes, or anything useful to fill the remaining time. But campaign field staff suspected any outsiders of being "trackers" — infiltrating Republicans. All office jobs, especially PR, were being undertaken by an isolated consulting firm in Seattle (outside the 8th District), under state Democratic Party central control. One field



Candidate for Congress Kim Schrier in Washington's 8th District, meets with a volunteer in the rain.

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staffer claimed that, "due to technology, modern campaigns simply don't need many finance or other staff other than phone-bankers and door-bellers."

Later, on other campaigns, I learned that two very effective methods for reaching voters were postcard writing and texting, with high hit rates. These tactics could be undertaken from home, but were apparently ignored by the Schrier campaign.

After my first week of only 18 hours of phone banking and door-belling, I asked for a meeting with a senior field ops staffer. I stated my under-utilization concern. I said I had already given \$250 to the campaign, and would be happy to give the maximum legal amount of \$2700, if more work of a suitable kind could be found. The staffer, an experienced and rather complacent ex-Party operative, was adamant. Door-belling or phone-calling was it. Knowing that money is the mother's milk of campaigns, I waited for her to ask me to give more money to the campaign, so she could get half a loaf. I was willing, but I wanted to be asked, in person, politely. She looked at me. She said nothing. I decided to take most of the rest of my budget and give it to other candidates with better managed campaigns. (I did continue with a mailing to my own contact list, that raised over \$2000 for Schrier.) As we finished the meeting, the staffer stated firmly

that the campaign was "running like a well-oiled machine."

To her credit, it was running at high speed, largely due to the droves of Trump-hating volunteers. In my two previous political campaigns, one was a huge winner and one a disaster. I recognize disasters; this was not one. But I also know "well-oiled machines," and this one had problems, as follows.

The campaign strategy re issues was to focus initially on health care and pre-existing conditions. This was fine, except when a marvelous opportunity came along to show the electorate the failure of Republican environmental policies. In my second week in Washington state, the whole District was covered with ash and smoke from huge fires in California and Canada. Visibility was down to a few hundred yards. I urged the campaign to set up a demonstration at the headquarters of our opponent, blaming him and his party for this "in-your-face" environmental catastrophe. This demo would have attracted local media coverage, which the campaign sorely lacked. My suggestion was ignored.

One of the biggest local events was the famous Ellensburg Rodeo, on the far eastern edge of the District. I asked the field staffer in charge if she needed volunteers to accompany Dr. Schrier in the Rodeo parade, which drew thousands of potential voters. At first she said that I could go, then she uninvited me, saying

that there was no need for more volunteers. So I went on my own. I saw Dr. Schrier and her entourage of only seven volunteers, and then viewed her opponent Dino Rossi and his seventeen supporters and sign-carriers. The not-so-subliminal message was quite clear.

It took 25 of my 31 days to get through to the isolated fund-raising staff, and finally get myself invited to a fund-raiser at a private home, where I donated another \$250 to the campaign, met Dr. Schrier briefly, and heard her give an impressive speech.

Campaign staff made no effort to celebrate the few out-of-state volunteers who were trying to work full-time. The campaign ran out of brochures and signs several times, the brochures sometimes omitted vital contact information, phone callers often omitted leaving messages, door-bellers were often told not to leave literature, some field interns did not have checklists of needed items, the robocaller failed regularly, and there was an agonizingly slow restart after the primary. The campaign did not exploit my opposition research findings, did not utilize my suggestions about trade and tariff experts, did not emphasize Kim's EPA work and expertise, did not try to peel off traditional Republicans worried about Trump's new trillion-dollar deficit, etc., etc.

As a consultant to 14 Federal agencies and 30 foreign govern-



A phone bank uses modern computer software at Kim Schrier's campaign headquarters.

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ments, I have analyzed numerous organizations. My analysis is that the Schrier campaign was largely impenetrable to ideas from the outside, siloed inside, overly layered, had execution problems, and was not "agile."

Dr. Schrier will be a terrific Congressperson. She is smart, compassionate, a health care expert, and she will be the only female medical doctor in the entire Congress. But I am afraid that if droves of volunteers do not emerge in 2020 and 2022 for her and other Democrats, and those campaigns are run as B- traditional Party efforts instead of as A++ agile performances, she and other Dems may well lose. That would be a tragedy for her, her District, and the nation.