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TRAVEL TALES

Surfing the Blue Wave Down the East Coast: Traveling for Political Change in the 2018 Elections

by Llewellyn Toulmin

Abigail Spanberger (right), former US Postal law enforcement officer and CIA officer, and Democratic running for Congress, with voters in her district in northeast Virginia. (Courtesy photo)



My last two columns covered the successful Dr. Kim Schrier campaign for Congress that I assisted for a month in September 2018. This piece will describe “surfing the Democratic blue wave” with my wife Susan, in five campaigns down the US East Coast.

We started in October in eastern Virginia, at a postcard party for Abigail Spanberger, VA-07 Democrat for Congress. She was a former CIA officer and Postal policewoman who had had all the details of her personal life illegally revealed by Republicans and the US Postal Service, who released her entire, secret, SF-86 classification questionnaire. Her opponent falsely accused her of “teaching at a school for terrorists,” when actually her entire career had been devoted to protecting the USA.

At the party for 50 volunteers, Susan and I addressed 120 postcards. Each card had been hand-done with personalized messages. Our hostess said, “We have produced 7000

postcards in just a week! We cleaned out all the postcard stamps from three Post Offices!” Our hostess was so pleased to have guests from out of state that she gave Susan a homemade T-shirt saying, “Orange Lies Matter,” with a giant orange swoop of hair. Using her effective tactics, Abigail won by 50.3 to 48.4 percent.

Next in North Carolina I helped Linda Coleman in the NC-02 District east of Raleigh. My most effective tactic was “poll-greeting,” where I was assigned to a polling station with long lines of early voters. In three hours I was able to talk to 600 actual voters—far more than I was able to talk to in an entire month of calling and doorbelling in Washington state! I persuaded 17 undecideds to vote for Coleman, by talking to everyone in line, and showing them an incredible photo of NC-02 Republican Congressman George Holding, asleep in the Speaker’s chair while serving as temporary Speaker of the House!

Despite this, Holding went on to beat Coleman by 51.4 to 45.7 percent. Apparently many NC voters prefer a lazy white man literally asleep on the job to an active black woman eager to work for them.

Driving on to Atlanta, we helped Stacey Abrams for Governor and Carolyn Bourdeaux for Congress. Bourdeaux was one of the most qualified candidates in the country, with a Ph.D. in public administration from the Maxwell School of Syracuse University (my old MPA alma mater, the top PA school in the nation), and deep expertise in federal/state finance.

Over five days we sent out 3500 text messages, using Hustle commercial software on our phone and laptops. Often we did this from our hotel room, in our pajamas! The software provided standardized text messages that we could personalize. This was very effective, since now many people primarily use texts, and ignore calls and emails.

On the November 6 election day I went to the local Abrams field HQ, to make calls and take voters to the polls. Each ride took 90 minutes, including time to vote and go to home and back. Both my voters were charming elderly black ladies with walkers.

The first lady, whom I will call Mrs. Johnson, had an alarming experience. She had requested an early voting mail ballot five times, and hadn’t received anything for weeks. Finally, a week before the election, she received two blank ballots. She mailed one in, and thought she was finished. But then the day before the election, she got a call from the Georgia Democrats, who had legal access to the voter records. They told her that her vote had not been counted, and she needed to go to the polls in person.

At the poll it appeared that Mrs. Johnson would be allowed to vote, no problem. But then the black female supervisor intervened, concerned that Mrs. Johnson might be voting twice. The supervisor called the central office, and learned that Johnson’s mail-in ballot

had been cancelled “because the central office knew that the voter was going in person to the polls.” But the central office could not have known that! Mrs. Johnson hadn’t decided to come in until the last minute. That raised the question of whether the central voting office, supervised by Secretary of State and candidate for Governor Brian Kemp, had illegally cancelled Mrs. Johnson’s mail-in vote, knowing from voter records that she was black, to eliminate her vote. And perhaps the central office was doing this to hundreds of other black early voters? After 20 minutes of back and forth on the phone, Mrs. Johnson was finally allowed to vote in person.

I reported this to the “boiler room” of Democratic election lawyers, but never learned if voter theft was proven here. Eventually both Carolyn Bourdeaux and Stacey Abrams lost by narrow margins of 49.9/50.1 and 48.8/50.2 respectively. But due to the pattern of voter suppression pursued for years by Kemp, in which 1.3 million voters were purged, it is clear that these were not election “losses.” These were thefts.

Arriving at our second home in Fairhope, Alabama, we still weren’t finished! In late November we tried to help Mike Espy for US Senate in a run-off in neighboring Mississippi. But his campaign was overwhelmed with volunteers, his staff was not able to organize assignments for us, their Hustle software didn’t work well, and eventually we sent only 150 texts and made 60 calls from Alabama. Espy lost by a margin of 46.1/53.9 percent, reflecting the tough nature of his state, his non-aggressive performance in the one campaign debate, and his campaign’s organizational problems.

In addition to participating, I gave money to seven other Democrats, including four women and a man who lost, but two winners: Jennifer Wexton (VA-10) and Kyrsten Sinema, the surprise winner in Arizona and the first openly bi-sexual US Senator in history.

Our overall takeaways: voter theft by Republicans is serious and must be fought, women candidates should be supported, Democratic tactics need serious upgrading, and the 2020 election starts now!