Defeat of voter ID was team effort

by Paul Demko
Published: November 14th, 2012

Broad coalition led by TakeAction Minnesota won by making the most of modestly funded drive

At the end of April, the interfaith coalition ISAIAH held a daylong gathering for religious leaders to discuss the proposed constitutional amendment requiring voters to show photo identification at the polls. The event was organized in conjunction with Jewish Community Action and the StairStep Foundation, which works closely with predominantly African-American churches, and attracted 250 individuals.

Out of that gathering the group selected anchor congregations — including St. Joan of Arc Church in Minneapolis and Progressive Baptist Church on the East Side of St. Paul — to help create a campaign opposing the proposed amendment. The group also identified 100 “voter restriction team leaders” from congregations across the state. Eventually ISAIAH, which works primarily on racial and economic justice issues, set a goal of speaking with 25,000 voters about why the photo ID requirement was a misguided idea.

The group had never before engaged directly in trying to influence election outcomes. Owing to its tax-exempt status, ISAIAH is prohibited from explicitly endorsing candidates. The nonprofit group didn’t even have the phone bank capacity to begin making the calls that it had committed to. A national umbrella organization with which the group is affiliated donated three automatic dialers to help the fledgling operation.

Eventually they had at least 20 phone lines staffed with volunteers five nights a week. Using a voter database, they were able to initially target 100,000 likely voters who were anticipated to be people of faith primarily in the southern and western suburbs and the St. Cloud region.

ISAIAH hit its target for communicating with 25,000 voters before the end of October. In the final five days before the election, the group filled 300 volunteer shifts that continued right up until polls closed.

"By that point, our volunteers were so excited because it was really this incredible experience,” recalled Doran Schrantz, ISAIAH’s executive director, noting that polls were showing a dramatic drop in support for voter ID in the closing weeks of the campaign. “We saw that the polls were decreasing and decreasing and decreasing. It was tightening and tightening and tightening. By the time we got to that last push, people were just on fire.”

By the time the operation was concluded, ISAIAH’s volunteers had talked directly with 37,000 people — almost 50 percent more than its initial goal. “It really was a scale that we had never operated on before,” Schrantz said. “We were testing a lot of things about the organization.”

Broad anti-amendment coalition

ISAIAH was just one key piece of a coalition that helped produce the greatest upset of the 2012 election season. In May 2011, a poll conducted by the Star Tribune found that 80 percent of respondents supported a photo ID requirement at the polls. Even within weeks of Election Day, it still appeared that the amendment would pass overwhelmingly. A poll conducted by SurveyUSA in early September, for instance, determined that voters approved of the measure by a 62-31 percent margin. It wasn’t until the closing weeks of the campaign that polls began showing support for photo ID evaporating. Ultimately the amendment failed by a surprisingly wide margin: Just 46 percent of those casting ballots voted in favor of it.

The defeat provided validation for foes of the amendment, who many initially viewed as fighting a quixotic battle.

"I thought there was a real collective failure to see the fight as winnable," said Javier Morillo, president of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 26, another important player in the campaign against the amendment. "It was like pulling teeth to get other unions to contribute, to think about it as anything that anyone should invest in.”

The coalition that eventually came together to fight the measure — known as Our Vote Our Future — was led by TakeAction Minnesota. Along with SEIU and ISAIAH, it included AARP Minnesota, the Minnesota AFL-CIO, The Arc Minnesota and Neighborhoods Organizing for Change, among others.

The campaign was overshadowed financially by the fight over the gay marriage amendment. The group raised roughly $3 million, less than a quarter of what Minnesotans United for All Families, the main group opposing the marriage amendment, took in. Much of that came from in-kind donations of staff time rather than cash. And the salary of Our Vote Our Future's campaign manager, Luchelle Stevens, was paid for by SEIU’s national office. The communications staff consisted primarily of staffers from TakeAction Minnesota, Minnesotans for a Fair Economy, the AFL-CIO and Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak’s office.

Dan McGrath, TakeAction Minnesota’s executive director, points out that such a strategy was born out of economic necessity. "What are the assets we had to work with?" he asks. "We had public opinion completely slanted against us. We had most of... the political establishment writing this off. The only thing we did have was a set of organizations who were like, 'We're going to work on this. Some way, shape or form we're going to do something.' ... The campaign had to be bigger than any one organization, and we recognized that.”

Each group was tasked with reaching out to its core constituency. The AARP, for example, put out 40,000 phone calls to recruit seniors for five different tele-town halls devoted to the issue. The Land Stewardship Project, which works closely with farmers across the state, editorialized against the measure in its newsletter, which goes out to 4,000 supporters. That opinion piece also ran in two newspapers devoted to agricultural issues. Neighborhoods Organizing for Change focused its organizing efforts on persuading residents of North Minneapolis to oppose the amendment.

"I am convinced that our messengers were as important as our message,” McGrath said. "If you're going to ask someone to vote against their common sense, you need to be a credible person in that voter's eyes.”

NEA, Soros money seeded effort

But that grass-roots effort almost certainly wouldn’t have been enough by itself to defeat the amendment. As the polls began to show movement, Our Vote Our Future was able to raise enough money to get up on the airwaves in the weeks leading up to Election Day. McGrath credits $300,000 in contributions from the National Education Association with providing financial and political credibility at a key moment. Our
Voice Our Future also received a $500,000 contribution from the Open Society Policy Center, which is bankrolled by billionaire financier George Soros, in mid-October.

Opponents of the voter ID amendment cite an ad featuring former GOP Gov. Arne Carlson and current DFL Gov. Mark Dayton as particularly crucial in turning public opinion. Mark Schultz, associated director of the Land Stewardship Project, says that the spot came up frequently in talking to voters on the phone. "It gave a broad consensus from important leaders of our state, Republican and DFL," Schultz said.

Schrantz witnessed a similar phenomenon. "On the phones, after those ads went up, lots of people talked about Gov. Arne Carlson," Schrantz said. "I think that pushed it the rest of the way."

But the voter ID opponents also undoubtedly benefited from the lack of a credible campaign on behalf of the proposed amendment. The main group promoting the measure, Protect My Vote, raised just $1.5 million, a paltry sum for a statewide campaign. Almost all of that money — $1.3 million — came from just one person: conservative mega-donor Joan Cummins.

The head of Protect My Vote, also named Dan McGrath, didn't return calls from Capitol Report seeking comment for this story. But in comments on Election Day, he complained that his opponents had misled voters about the consequences of adopting the amendment.

"It's senior citizens won't be able to vote. Soldiers won't be able to vote. Students won't be able to vote. [Voters are] afraid it comes with all of this excess baggage," McGrath told the Star Tribune. "Which it doesn't."

Pro-amendment divisions

Republican activist and fundraiser Joey Gerdin led an ancillary pro-amendment effort known as Voter ID for MN that raised money to place billboards across the state. Initially the plan was to buy a dozen billboards during the 12 weeks leading up to Election Day. But because of fundraising struggles, that plan was scaled back to six weeks. "People thought this was easily going to pass and therefore did not need to fund it," Gerdin said. "I told people for months that that's not going to be the case. Trying to get people to fund it, quite honestly, was the number one problem."

But Gerdin is also deeply critical of the effort put forth by her fellow photo ID proponents. In mid-October, she sent a lacerating email to McGrath and other supporters of the photo ID amendment complaining about their tactical shortcomings. "Your organization has been completely partisan," Gerdin wrote. "I personally went to two meetings with your organization and still have a dent in my forehead. Your organization is great at lobbying, but quite honestly suck at messaging. Also, looking at your finance report, you waste donors' money. Your organization has been the face of Voter ID for months and the support has dropped from plus 80 to less than 60, and your organization can take credit for that."

The fundraising troubles and tactical shortcomings of Protect My Vote undoubtedly helped create the void that opponents of the amendment were able to exploit. TakeAction Minnesota and its allies estimate that their persuasion calls were turning as many as 20 to 30 percent of likely voters that they connected with on the phone. On the final day before voters went to the polls, Our Vote Our Future had 120 volunteers at four different call centers making roughly 20,000 calls an hour. The only real question was whether they would run out of time before they convinced enough people to turn against the amendment.

"We were running against the clock the entire time," TakeAction’s McGrath said. "That was the thing that left you uncertain. We know we were doing the right things; we know we were making a difference. The only question was, were we going to reach enough people before Election Day?"