

<https://www.sonomacountygazette.com/cms/pages/sonoma-county-news-article-1019.html>

Sonoma County Gazette
January 1, 2013

Why Susan Gorin Won: the Blue-Green Alliance and Grassroots Politics in Sonoma County

By Martin J. Bennett

Susan Gorin's election to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors in the 1st District is a pivotal moment for Sonoma County politics. For the first time in decades there is a progressive majority on the board including Gorin, Shirlee Zane (3rd District), and Mike McGuire (4th District).

What were the main reasons for her victory--and why would Susan ultimately prevail, when polling suggested two weeks before the election that she and her opponent, John Sawyer, were running neck and neck with 30 percent of the voters undecided?

This brief overview will assess the main reasons for the 2012 Election Day success of the Gorin campaign. Without a doubt, the ground campaign in the Sonoma Valley and Santa Rosa was the decisive factor that enabled her to win.

Main Reasons for Victory

First, Susan had a solid base of support in eastern Santa Rosa and Oakmont as a result of her many years of citizen activism, her four years on the school board and her six years on the city council. She brought an impressive record of advocacy for smart growth and transit-oriented development, good jobs, mass transit, affordable housing, protection of open space and agriculture, and water conservation to the supervisorial campaign. Her appearances at

events in the Sonoma Valley, election forums, precinct walking, and media interviews demonstrated to attentive voters that she was a thoughtful, compassionate, and experienced candidate with a firm understanding of local government and key issues before the Board of Supervisors.

Second, Susan has played a central role during the last decade in the building of a “blue-green” coalition of labor and environmentalists that includes the North Bay Labor Council, SEIU 1021, Living Wage Coalition, Sonoma County Conservation Action, Accountable Development Coalition, Sonoma County Bike Coalition, Housing Advocacy Group, Concerned Citizens of Santa Rosa, Friends of SMART, Sierra Club, Progressive Democrats, Leadership Institute for Ecology and the Economy, the North Bay Organizing Project and various neighborhood organizations. In addition, local and smaller businesses, including wineries and family farmers, played an important role. Finally, the Sonoma County Democratic Party is an essential partner in the emerging blue-green alliance, and for the Gorin campaign the party provided funding, volunteers, and a critical endorsement.

Third, her participation and leadership in numerous campaigns and policy initiatives that were supported by labor, environmental, and community-based organizations in Santa Rosa and the county enabled Susan to develop strong relationships with leaders and rank and file members of these organizations. The main campaigns initiated by the emerging blue-green alliance included: the jobs-housing linkage fee campaign in 2005, the anti-Wal-Mart campaign in southwest Santa Rosa in 2006-2008, the Santa Rosa green building standards ordinance in 2007, approval for the SMART sales tax initiative in 2008 and opposition to the repeal campaign in 2011, the Santa Rosa Lowes anti-big box campaign in 2009, and the proposed Highway 101 connector/bicycle bridge for Santa Rosa in 2011.

Fourth, Susan has clearly “walked the walk” as an elected official, who, over many years, has worked closely with, and believes she is accountable to, the labor, environmental, nonprofit, Latino, faith-based and neighborhood organizations which comprise her base.

The substantial number of highly motivated volunteers in her campaign reflected her long-standing relationships with social movements and progressive advocacy organizations in the district and the county.

Fifth, Susan raised sufficient funding to be competitive, despite the fact that contributions from developers and other big business interests enabled Sawyer to spend \$100,000 more. Many more individuals contributed to the Gorin campaign, while Sawyer received large contributions from a relatively small number of business interests.

The Ground Campaign

Her major campaign costs were for staff and five targeted mailers that introduced her to Sonoma Valley residents, conveyed her positions, values, and endorsements, and accurately portrayed her opponent as a conservative Democrat with long-standing ties to the most powerful developer and big agricultural interests in the county. Two of the campaign's mailers, "Who is Trying to Buy Sonoma County?" and "Think Like An Elephant" (after Sawyer received the Sonoma County Republican Party endorsement) were effective.

I believe the final precinct tallies will indicate that the most important reason for Susan's victory was the ground operation in the precincts in the Sonoma Valley/Boyes Hot Springs and, to a lesser extent, Oakmont and Santa Rosa. Both Susan and her opponent were well known in the northern part of the district in Santa Rosa, and the candidates split the vote there during the primary. Most of the voters in the southern part of the district, however, preferred a local candidate during the primary, and the run-off in the fall general election depended on which of the two candidates could prevail in the Sonoma Valley.

It was Susan's ground operation that enabled her to win, particularly given that it was certain the election would be very close. On the flip side, Sawyer did not organize any substantial precinct walking or phone banks in the Sonoma Valley--and he likely had few volunteers

willing do such work.

Recent academic research confirms that face-to-face contact with voters is still the best way to win votes and to turn people out to vote. Moreover, door-to-door canvassing and precinct organizing is much less costly than television and mailers. Ground campaigns have become more sophisticated in recent years, deploying massive databases, hand-held smart phones, and other devices to identify voters in a particular household. As demonstrated by the nationwide 2008 Obama campaign, and in selected battleground states like Ohio in 2012, door-to-door canvassing is most effective when experienced, paid community and grassroots organizers provide training for highly motivated volunteers who are part of a team assigned to a given neighborhood or precinct (1).

Role of Environmentalists

Sonoma County Conservation Action's (SCCA) 'Know Your Neighbor (KYN)' program has a dedicated and full-time staff person who recruited campaign volunteers, organized volunteer environmental walkers, and raised funds for the campaign from environmentalists in the district.

The SCCA canvass team walked the entire district early in the campaign, and SCCA mobilized 150 volunteers to participate in the campaign. A dozen SCCA canvassers returned to the Sonoma Valley during the last week of the campaign for the final push and the Get Out the Vote (GOTV). All together the canvass knocked on more than 20,000 doors in the 1st Supervisorial District during the run-off.

The SCCA canvass played a critical role informing environmental voters that on numerous issues concerning smart growth, environmental protection, and sustainability, Sawyer consistently came down on the side of the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce and the largest developers and real estate interests in the county.

Susan's opponent falsely attempted to reinvent himself as an environmentalist and sent numerous mailers to voters touting his

environmental achievements. SCCA sent its newsletter and “environmental report card” (Gorin received an ‘A’ and Sawyer an ‘F’) to nearly a thousand members in the district. The Sierra Club also notified its members about the club’s early endorsement of Gorin by a post card and in their newsletter sent to all members in the district.

Role of Labor

Labor mounted an equally impressive ground operation (2). SEIU 1021 assigned a full-time staff person to mobilize their members for local elections; and SEIU 1021 members began to walk precincts in the 1st District before Labor Day and participated in a phone bank to inform all their members about the union’s endorsements of Gorin and other candidates for state and local offices. The North Bay Labor Council, with a full-time phone bank coordinator and a political organizer assigned by the AFL-CIO, organized labor volunteers to phone bank all labor households in the district and to walk precincts. For the final push and GOTV four days prior to the November 6th election, labor flooded the 1st Supervisorial District with more than 80 labor walkers, and volunteers phone banked thousands of labor union households.

During the campaign labor canvassers carried walk lists identifying labor households and distributed a flyer supporting Susan. Labor walkers also carried literature for other state and local labor endorsed candidates. Most labor walkers and phone bank volunteers also asked voters to support Proposition 30 and to oppose Proposition 32. Without question, Susan benefitted by her support for 30 (Sawyer opposed) and opposition to 32 (Sawyer supported). Labor also provided significant funding for Susan’s campaign, including important contributions in the final weeks.

The Sonoma Valley Grassroots

Finally, many volunteers for Susan Gorin’s ground operation, particularly those who began walking precincts and organizing for the November run-off immediately after the June primary, were part of a

grass roots infrastructure developed over the last 15 years in the Sonoma Valley.

A committee of Sonoma Valley residents and a local campaign staffer anchored the Gorin campaign in the valley. Most of these volunteers participated in one or more past grassroots campaigns such as Mike Smith's successful SRJC trustee race in 1998; approval of a ballot initiative banning the construction of a resort hotel on the last open space in the city; the City of Sonoma urban growth boundary campaign in 2000; the City of Sonoma Living Wage campaign in 2004; and several successful city council campaigns, including those of progressives Joe Costello in 2000, and Steve Barbose in 2006. Many who supported Will Pier's insurgent campaign against incumbent Supervisor Valerie Brown in 2008 (that fell short by a mere 200 votes) became involved in the Gorin campaign.

Local volunteers walked precincts, tabled at farmer's markets, organized house meetings and fundraisers, wrote numerous letters to the editor, and tapped into their own extensive personal and social networks to build support for Susan. Perhaps most importantly, the ground campaign and personal networks in the Sonoma Valley were essential to inform Democratic voters--before absentee voting began and then prior to the general election--that the Democratic Party endorsed Susan and that John Sawyer was endorsed by the Sonoma County Republican Party.

The Sonoma County Democratic Party also mailed their endorsements to all Democrats in the district, and walkers for the Gorin campaign carried the Democratic federal, state, and local endorsements door-to-door.

Conclusion

The Gorin campaign is an excellent example of how organized people can prevail over organized money. Feedback from voters at the door suggests that if anything, Sawyer's numerous robo-calls (almost daily during the final stretch run), his flood of mailers, and gargantuan signs on large sites alienated many voters. By contrast, the Gorin

campaign's direct contact with voters by door-to door canvassing, phone bank, and personal networks were the deciding factors in the race.

The most important lesson of the Gorin campaign is that progressives in Sonoma County need to prioritize building an enduring grassroots electoral infrastructure in each supervisorial district. What we do between election cycles to develop such an infrastructure is as important as the election campaign itself. Money is important, but not decisive in local elections. Polling can be helpful, but cannot replace direct contact with voters at the door. Mailers are important, but do not win close elections. We cannot win elections and maintain progressive majorities on city councils and the Board of Supervisors without a long-term commitment by labor, environmental, faith and community based organizations to build systematically a bottom-up people-powered ground operation across the county.

Susan Gorin's victory is a stunning defeat for the county's political establishment represented by the Sonoma County Alliance and led by former Congressman Doug Bosco, former Santa Rosa City Manager Ken Blackman, political consultant Herb Williams, and elected officials like Santa Rosa Mayor Ernesto Olivares. Gorin's election is directly linked to the progressives and the emerging blue-green alliance attempts to win a majority on the Board of Supervisors. The first major breakthrough in recent years was the election of Shirlee Zane who defeated former Santa Rosa mayor Sharon Wright in 2008.

The 'old regime' as described by James Wilkinson in his insightful book, Who Rules Santa Rosa and Why It Matters, is deeply entrenched and remains a powerful, if not the dominant force in Sonoma County politics (2). In the recent elections, progressives failed to win a majority on the Santa Rosa City Council or the Petaluma City Council, and Measure Q, mandating district elections in Santa Rosa, was rejected by a wide margin. Earlier this year, the Santa Rosa City Council majority weakened smart growth principles for the North Station Area Plan for the Guerneville Road SMART train station (as a consequence of the Coddington Mall's opposition to higher density and more affordable housing), and the council

approved a 143,000 square foot Target for Coddington close to the train station that will create hundreds of low wage jobs without benefits. In addition, by a 3-2 split vote, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors in September rejected a proposed Project Labor Agreement for all public works projects above \$25 million.

Progressives are now a majority on the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, but can progressives maintain that majority and can the progressive bloc govern? Can progressives articulate and implement a comprehensive agenda for sustainable and equitable growth that addresses the structural issues of growing income inequality; deepening racial segregation and discrimination against immigrants; systematic defunding of the public sector and public education; and the continued approval by local government of land use decisions that undermine smart growth and promote auto dependency, big box retail, and unaffordable low-density housing?

Martin Bennett teaches American history at Santa Rosa Junior College, serves on the board of Sonoma County Conservation Action, is past president of the California Federation of Teachers Local 1946, and a research and policy analyst for UNITEHERE Local 2850, representing hotel and gaming workers in the East and North Bay. He resides in the City of Sonoma and has canvassed his precinct every election cycle since 1994. Contact him at: mbennett@vom.com

(1) A recent article in the New Yorker summarizes the academic research on this issue:

http://www.newyorker.com/talk/financial/2012/09/24/120924ta_talk_s_urowiecki

Also see these two books based upon extensive field research:

Donald Green and Alan Gerber - Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout (Brookings Institution: 2008)

<http://www.brookings.edu/research/books/2004/getoutthevote>

Rasmus Nielson – Ground Wars: Personalized Communication in Political Campaigns (Princeton: 2012).

<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9616.html>

According to sociologist Marshall Ganz, in the best ground campaigns there is ongoing community organizing between election cycles that incorporates voter registration, education, and leadership training, and local residents canvass and organize their own precincts during the election. Ganz is a legendary former United Farm Workers organizer who teaches at the Harvard Kennedy School. Ganz trained organizers for the 2008 Obama campaign and developed the three-day 'Camp Obama' trainings and curriculum for Obama staff and volunteers:

Marshall Ganz – 'Organizing Obama: Campaign, Organizing and Movement' (unpublished paper Harvard Kennedy School 2009).

<http://marshallganz.usmblogs.com/files/2012/08/Organizing-Obama-Final.pdf>

(2) It should be noted that the North Bay Labor Council and most unions endorsed Susan Gorin. However, several important public safety unions endorsed John Sawyer including the Santa Rosa Firefighters Association, Sonoma County Deputy Sheriff's Association, and the Santa Rosa Police Officers Association. The county's two largest environmental organizations, the Sierra Club and Sonoma County Conservation Action, endorsed Susan Gorin; Sawyer received no endorsements from environmental organizations.

(3) James Wilkinson – Who Rules Santa Rosa and Why It Matters chs. 2-5 (Universe 2010)

