

# 3

## Long-Term Strategy in Local Elections

*Stephen Daniels*

Type of campaign: Mayoral, city council, ballot measure (general)

Role of author: Campaign planner, strategist

Lessons to look for:

- The rules and procedures under which campaigns operate matter.
- Planning, organization, and strategy matter.
- Campaigns are about taking advantage of opportunities.
- Incumbency, like inertia, is hard to overcome (but not impossible).
- Campaigns need both free and paid media to get their message out.
- Campaigning is a contact sport, sometimes played dirty.

Unlike the others writing in this collection, my life as a political scientist is not focused on campaigns and elections. Rather, I study law and politics. My reasons for political involvement are similar to those of the people with whom I have worked on various campaigns in my town—Downers Grove, Illinois, a Chicago suburb. We're interested in the quality of life in our community, good government, and so on. In the world of politics, people like us are referred to derogatorily as "goo-goos"—do-gooders who make a lot of noise but are seldom effective because of their political naïveté. As will become clear, although we may be "goo-goos," we see ourselves as "goo-goos" with an aggressive, pragmatic edge, and it has helped us to have some degree of success influencing elections in our town.

Most of what I've learned about campaigns and elections has been learned on the ground as a local officeholder, community activist, and head of a local citizens' group. This chapter chronicles that group's origins and key activities, and in so doing it reveals what we learned in the process and how we used that

knowledge. Most immediately, it's a story of small town politics and how a community group can influence local elections. More generally, it's also a story of the importance of strategy for achieving success in the contingent world of politics—a world populated by a very interesting array of players.

There is one piece from my training in political science that I find increasingly useful and regularly reread—*The Prince*, by Niccolo Machiavelli. It's not a contemporary blueprint by any means, but it teaches about strategic action and how it must react to varying real world contexts over the long term. It is empirical, unsentimental, and pragmatic, and the work's insights into human nature and human failings always illuminate the context in which I play politics. At times, however, Jimmy Breslin's comic and now classic 1969 novel about New York City mobsters—*The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight*—may be more apt in trying to understand some of my group's political opponents and in charting a strategy to defeat them.

### The Importance of Strategy

Decisions made on election day are powerful opportunities for achieving a wide variety of goals in the political system. Because self-interest drives elections, those goals may be virtuous or nefarious—it makes no difference. Elections are just a means to an end. In other words, they are a part of a strategy. Most simply, strategy is defined as a directed plan of action for achieving a goal or set of goals. As a result, strategies are usually judged by their degree of success rather than their normative virtue. And a good strategy is needed in an election. Otherwise, you lose.

Campaign organizations are the most visible manifestation of strategy when talking about elections. They are focused and easily observable as the formalized and structured version of a strategy. Strategy needs organization to coordinate and direct the parts, keep them on target, and make adjustments as the situation changes. Those three goals matter because strategies always play out in fluid environments—nothing is certain or predictable. Although a well-run campaign is necessary, it is not sufficient to reach a goal, and it is not the entirety of strategy. Strategy is broader than just the nuts and bolts of organizing and running a campaign. It is also about the goal animating that campaign, which may have a public face and a private reality—what is presented to the public and what the candidate really is after. Strategy is about articulating the substance of the public face and, if need be, shielding the private reality. A campaign is unlikely to be successful if it can't show why someone should vote for candidate X and not candidate Y.

In short, strategy is also about the politics of ideas and creating a narrative that defines the terms of debate for an election. Elections aren't just about competing candidates (or yes or no votes on a referendum). They are also about

competing narratives—competing visions of the present (and the existence of problems or threats) and competing visions of the future (and possible solutions). The involvement of interested parties—like my citizens' group—can complicate the competition over narrative. An interested party may act in concert with one side or the other, or it may have different goals and try to turn the direction of the election's narrative. In our town my group is a repeat player wanting to drive the narrative over a series of elections and win the battle of ideas.

Even though my focus will be on strategy, I would be remiss if I did not again emphasize the importance and need for a well-run organization. Key members within my group make sure it is a well-run organization and that tasks are completed—and completed well. They take care of the finances; the scheduling; the design and placement of press releases, advertisements, and mailings; the website; and many other matters. Without them any strategy would be futile.

### Context Is Everything

I ran for village council in 2001. The reason was a change for the worse in the town's administration and a concomitant change in the local political culture. In 1999, a well-respected mayor retired from office, and in the subsequent election a sitting village council member, who was her protégé, was defeated for the office. The victor was a younger candidate who grew up in town, was a star high school athlete, and became the chair of the township Republican Party organization. He was then and still is a politician with ambitions for higher office (especially one that pays a salary). In line with his ambitions, the new mayor's plans for our town were at times grandiose, expensive, and poorly thought out. Additionally, his way of doing business contrasted sharply to his predecessor's. Even today, many describe it as that of a schoolyard bully. In running for village council, my intent was to offer an alternative to some of the new mayor's plans and his way of doing business. I lost.

In retrospect, my goal was too narrow and my campaign strategy gave too little attention to the changing political culture. It's one thing to say your candidacy offers an alternative to the new crowd and their way of doing business and another to actually structure your strategy in ways that recognize the way things are actually working with the new crowd. A strategy based on the kind of political environment you want to see is not the same as one based on the environment as it presently exists. Again, strategies are not about virtue; they're about winning.

The new mayor operated on the basis of a strategy more politically sophisticated than seen in the recent past. It stretched beyond a single election and included a variety of ongoing, nonelectoral tactics. My strategy failed to adequately take this changed political context into account, but I learned some important lessons from that failure. And, it is important to note that these are not

lessons I learned alone. They are lessons learned among a group who shared a concern for the future of our community.

Two key things changed when this mayor came to power. The first involves hard-nosed partisanship. Many local elections in Illinois—meaning town councils, school boards, and the like—are formally nonpartisan elections. Once in a while, things actually work that way. As a more general rule, one is better advised to assume that there is no such thing as a truly nonpartisan election. That became especially clear in the mayor's initial victory in 1999.

My town is located in a solidly Republican county. Like his predecessor, the mayor is a staunch Republican, but unlike his predecessor, his involvement in community affairs is driven by his long-term partisan interests and personal ambitions. The previous mayor, in contrast, left partisan concerns and personal ambitions aside when it came to community affairs (since retiring from office, she has become a leader in the local chapter of the League of Women Voters). The new mayor was, at the time of his election, and still is, the head of the township Republican Party organization and controls its resources, especially most of the precinct captains. He has the support of a number of regional Republican officeholders, and he never leaves partisan concerns aside.

The policy of the local Republican Party organization under the new mayor's leadership was to work at placing only loyal Republicans on nonpartisan municipal bodies whenever possible and to work against anyone considered to be a Democrat or an insufficiently loyal Republican (loyalty defined as fealty to the mayor). The local Democratic organization, such as it is, specifically eschewed such involvement in nonpartisan elections. The mayor and his supporters tolerated no rivals and went after them—sometimes viciously (and even their family members or business partners). There are stories, but for some of us it is a matter of personal experience. Such rough treatment had the desired deterrent effect: Many people were unwilling to publicly criticize the mayor.

In short, the mayor brought to the community a rougher, no-holds-barred approach to everything political. At the extreme, some of the mayor's supporters even used the police to harass opponents or subject opponents to public ridicule by using the public comment time during the televised village council meetings (the comment time, of course, is controlled by the mayor). These tactics reminded many people of the thuggish town politics in Cicero, Illinois (a former mayor was recently released from federal prison). Originally, the comparison was made in jest as a piece of dark humor, but this changed when the mayor hired a political consulting firm run by a Republican operative with ties to the Cicero political establishment.

The hiring of a high-profile, partisan political consultant represents the second key indicator of change in the local political culture—for lack of a better term, the modernization of politics in our town. Local politics was now being tied to the larger arena of Illinois partisan politics and the ways in which those

politics are played. A key part of this is money and what it can buy. In the eyes of many residents, “pay-to-play”—the scourge of Illinois politics—came to town. Before, campaigns and fund-raising typically went into hibernation between elections, but the mayor's campaign never slept. Now fund-raising, particularly for the Republican Party, was an ongoing affair, and the prime vehicle has become an annual golf tournament. During his tenure, it was superbly organized by the new mayor's operatives with meticulous record keeping on who “participated” each year and to what degree. Those interested in doing business with the town and those with businesses in town were asked to contribute to the tournament's success—perhaps by sponsoring a hole or paying for refreshments or providing some other kind of support. There were prizes of various kinds, but the event is planned so that at the end of the day there was a substantial amount left to benefit the mayor's campaign fund. Of course, if golf isn't your game, you could simply write a check to the mayor's campaign fund anytime it seemed appropriate or was suggested.

Clearly, the political big dogs had moved in. Before, local nonpartisan elections tended to be inexpensive affairs with candidates spending in the low thousands. Campaigns were organized and run by friends and neighbors around someone's kitchen table with a meager budget of funds collected in small amounts from people in town during the campaign. It was relatively easy for someone to enter a race, and undue influence or reward as a result of large campaign contributions was not an issue. With the new political reality, entering a race became much harder and much more expensive.

The escalation in campaign spending says it all. Public records show that the mayor's initial 1999 campaign spent over \$40,000 and his opponent just under \$20,000. In comparison, the mayor's predecessor spent approximately \$4,600 in her initial election campaign for mayor in 1991, and spent less than \$3,000 in her 1995 reelection campaign. In the 2007 election, when the mayor was finally voted out of office (as I said, the “goo-goos” have had some success), his campaign spent over \$75,000. The successful candidate spent just over \$50,000. The new importance of money and the mayor's ability to raise it clearly stood as a major deterrent to a would-be challenger. And the mayor and his supporters also made it difficult for rivals to raise money. There is no better illustration of the challenger's disadvantage than the fact that the mayor ran unopposed for reelection in 2003.

If money was not a sufficient deterrent, then you also had to take into consideration the mayor's other resources. While you're trying to put a campaign together, the mayor had an ongoing political organization at his service. And even if the mayor's organizational resources were not enough to deter you, there were the likely personal costs. There was always the question of how much one was willing to tolerate in terms of threats and harassment (to family members too) from the mayor's supporters. In all respects of the term, these two factors—

organized, hard-nosed partisanship and money—kept the price of challenging the mayor very high. It wasn't just that the big dogs had come to town—they were junkyard dogs too.

### **Opportunities and Strategy**

By the time of the mayor's unopposed 2003 reelection, his goal was evident and more comprehensive than many originally realized—consolidating his power and control over village government and public affairs. Some thought that goal had been reached with little prospect of altering the new reality. Why was the new crowd so successful so quickly? In retrospect, the answer is simple—the mayor saw an opportunity and devised a long-term strategy to exploit it systematically. Most of his opponents didn't fully appreciate what was happening at the time because much of the mayor's strategy was invisible to them. Even the few who did grasp the change weren't sure what to do in response.

The mayor approached his goal with a political strategist's eye. He waited for the right kind of opportunity and found it in his initial election. He ran for an important office with the potential for the exercise of power, rather than just any office. He ran for an open seat rather than challenge an incumbent, which leveled the field considerably. He had a slick, professionally designed campaign that created a compelling narrative of him as a local boy who made good (a lawyer and a CPA) and was active in the community, a family man (although he has no children, campaign brochures showed him in posed pictures with children), a youth athletic coach, and a church member. He presented himself as someone seeing a bright future for the community—of course, one with low taxes. In looking at the political context, he clearly saw that there was no ongoing political organization to fight. Everyone but him treated that election as non-partisan, and he won as a result.

The mayor's success in consolidating power came quickly because there was no effective opposition after his initial election. A part of his strategy was to keep it that way by co-opting those he could and deterring significant opposition from others in ways consistent with the new political environment he created. Once firmly in power, however, the mayor started to show some surprising and troubling weaknesses when it came to governing. During his first term the village manager—a well-respected professional with a national reputation—was let go. The replacement didn't last long, and although the next manager lasted longer, he too was let go amid problems with the mayor.

In addition to the changes in the manager's office, a number of other professionals left the village's employ—some voluntarily, others not. Their replacements were not always as qualified, and a number of them also left in short order. Turnover became a serious problem; a number of community leaders began worrying that the town's reputation among municipal government professionals was suffering and driving top job prospects away. Much of the turnover came with

the mayor's penchant for involving himself in the day-to-day operation of village government to the lowest levels. Given his goals, the mayor saw every position as one with the potential for the exercise of power. The problem was that the village's form of government didn't allow this kind of active mayoral control over village operations.

Ultimately, these problems revealed that the mayor and his supporters really were not as smart as they seemed. No doubt his victory came from a relatively superior strategy and superior resources, but it was also because he faced little real opposition. In other words, the mayor had not really been tested, and despite the image presented by his campaign narrative, he did not possess a strong body of applicable experience. Perhaps we overestimated him. It was not at all certain that these big dogs were really that big after all, even if they were mean. Those of us concerned about the mayor's new political order started organizing to challenge him.

Organizing for political purposes is always challenging because it means mobilizing people around a common cause that they care about. Most people have busy lives and multiple obligations that take up much of their time and energy. On top of that, the aggressive and harassing tactics of the mayor's supporters acted to deter activity by those not in the mayor's camp. We needed something to galvanize people—some event or action that affected enough of the right people personally so outraged them that they felt they couldn't take it anymore. We needed an opportunity.

Opportunities, however, do not occur on a regular schedule like elections. In fact, they may not occur at all, so you hope for the best and try to be ready to take advantage of what fate—or your opponent—offers. During the mayor's unopposed reelection in 2003, the prospects looked especially dim. In the aftermath, he appeared to be well on his way to fully consolidating his power. By mid-2004, however, an opportunity began to unfold. Ironically, it was supplied by the mayor himself, and it may well have been a by-product of his unopposed reelection—an overabundance of hubris that began to resemble a tragic play, although at times it looked as much farce as tragedy.

In the summer of 2004, the mayor began a series of what he called town meetings to hear from residents regarding their concerns. I was among the invitees to these meetings, and like most, I initially thought they were an outreach effort by the village government. But there were some questions because the meetings were sponsored by the mayor's ongoing campaign committee rather than the village. In reality, these meetings were a part of the mayor's political strategy, which became evident when a number of village council members angrily and publicly protested the meetings. They revealed that not only were they left off the invitation list but also they weren't even told in advance of the plan to hold the meetings. The town meetings were just a charade.

Unknown at the time, the mayor was quietly planning to circulate petitions to gain enough signatures to place a major referendum on the ballot in the April 2005 local election. The town meetings were apparently a part of that plan. By

holding a number of well-attended, high-profile town meetings—with many of the invitees being community leaders—the mayor could use the emerging list of problems as proof of the need for the referendum he wanted on the ballot. The meetings would provide a compelling narrative pointing to numerous community problems and the need for some kind of solution. The mayor, through his referendum, would then propose a solution—a change in the village government to a “strong mayor” form of government—and he would be the model for it. Here was a vigorous, community-oriented mayor uncovering problems and acting forcefully to solve them. For some of us, it looked more like a coup d’état.

If successful, the mayor’s referendum would have replaced the “weak council, strong manager” form of government with a strong mayor form of government. Under the former, the mayor and council are essentially volunteer public servants who set policy, leaving the day-to-day operations of the town to a professional village manager and the staff he or she hires. In the strong mayor alternative, the elected mayor is the chief operating officer—the person responsible for the day-to-day operation of the village government, including the hiring and firing of all employees. It would formally give the mayor the scope of power he always wanted but could not fully achieve without the change. It would also provide him with a substantial salary since the mayor would be a full-time official. An added benefit for the mayor’s entourage was that they could seek election or appointment to other paid positions that would come with the new form of government.

The referendum effort, however, did not run as smoothly as the mayor had hoped. With this push for a strong mayor form of government and the town meeting charade, the mayor’s strategy was now obvious to all who cared to look. He was intent on fully consolidating power in his hands in ways that would give him almost complete working control over municipal government and make effective political opposition impossible—and have a position with a six-figure salary. His initiative to change the village’s form of government was the tipping point. It was the step too far in the eyes of many concerned people, and it provided the opportunity to mobilize people. Overlapping ad hoc groups began to form to discuss ways of stopping the mayor’s plan. I helped to organize one of those groups. The challenge was daunting because we were starting from behind and had no strategy beyond trying to stop the mayor and his supporters—but it was still an opportunity. Indeed, a likely reason for the town meeting charade and the planned quiet nature of the referendum effort was to control the narrative and leave opponents with little time to organize and mount any meaningful opposition.

### **Getting Organized and Fighting Back**

The ad hoc group of citizens I helped to organize and other existing groups scrambled to put together some kind of plan to defeat the measure. We assumed

that the mayor’s supporters would indeed get more than enough signatures to place the strong mayor referendum on the ballot—and they did. Fighting the measure once it was on the ballot would be especially tough because the April 2005 election would likely be a low-turnout election. There would be no statewide or congressional races, and it would not be a mayoral race (the local elections with the highest turnout). In low-turnout elections, the advantage goes to the side better able to mobilize its supporters and get them to the polls. The mayor’s organizational and financial resources, along with the head start, gave all of us pause.

A number of community leaders strongly expressed their opposition, wrote letters to the editors, and used their networks in an effort to mobilize broad political opposition with the hope of convincing the mayor not to formally file the petitions. Our group supported these various efforts, but it wasn’t clear how well they would work. Because there was every reason to believe that the mayor would simply plow ahead, we began to do the research necessary to build an understandable and persuasive case against the measure at the polls. The more we learned, the more concerned we became, not only because of how fundamentally this would change local government, but also because of the poor track records of Illinois cities and towns with the strong mayor form of government. The question, of course, was whether a quickly constructed argument on the merits would work in a low-turnout election against a well-resourced opponent with a significant head start.

Fearing the answer, we also began exploring ways of keeping the measure off the ballot. Why go through the expense and risk of trying to defeat a ballot measure at the polls if you can keep it off the ballot in the first place? For this reason opponents will check signatures on nominating petitions or look for violations of other statutory requirements, such as the deadline for filing or the precise wording of a ballot measure. Problems with one of these matters—or others—may be sufficient to keep a candidate or a measure off the ballot. Such problems can be the bane of any campaign if the organizers are not careful to thoroughly research the relevant requirements because petition challenges provide wonderful opportunities for opponents willing to invest the time and effort. Some may consider such a tactic to be “winning ugly,” but the idea, after all, is to win any way you can within the rules.

I was among those pushing hard for this tactic. Although the mayor (himself a practicing attorney) and his supporters (key ones also practicing attorneys) were known for their bare-knuckles approach to politics, they were not known for their careful attention to detail or depth of knowledge. Usually they didn’t have to worry about such things because their aggressive tactics were sufficient to deter opponents (who didn’t always do their homework either). Additionally, I had used this tactic successfully over a decade before in keeping a referendum issue off the ballot because it was not filed within the statutory deadline.

There was another reason for trying this tactic, which had to do with a second, very different, referendum issue that could also appear on the April ballot.

This one was, in some ways, the opposite of the strong mayor question. If both matters were on the ballot, we would have been in the position of fighting a bizarre, two-front war. A group of residents opposed to some of the mayor's recent economic redevelopment efforts and their costs for the taxpayers—especially a multimillion-dollar parking structure—had begun a petition drive to strip the village of its “home rule” powers. If both questions made it to the ballot, we would easily be stretched beyond our capacity to act effectively, and so we hoped to keep at least one referendum, if not both, off the April ballot.

Without going into the legal details, home rule authority in Illinois gives municipalities significant independent power to pass ordinances on a variety of matters unless the Illinois Constitution or a statute prohibits it. It allows greater leeway for local governments to respond to their needs in ways most appropriate to that locale. Much of what the village had done with regard to redevelopment and what it planned to do involved its home rule powers. There was, and still is, substantial controversy surrounding the village's various redevelopment efforts. The group fighting home rule hoped to tap into the discontent surrounding redevelopment.

In early January 2005, this group filed petitions with the village clerk's office to place a binding measure on the April ballot asking the voters to rescind the village's home rule powers. After examining the signatures on the petition sheets filed with the clerk's office, members of my group quickly filed a formal objection to this referendum with the village election board. Our challenge was simple—a count showed that the petitions were over 1,000 signatures short of the statutory requirement. In response to our challenge, the village election board ruled that the home rule question would not appear on the April ballot. One battle won.

We hoped to be equally successful in keeping the strong mayor question off the April ballot too, but something other than the number of signatures would be needed. When the mayor and his supporters formally filed the petitions to place the strong mayor question on the ballot, they had more than enough. After substantial research, one member of our group (not an attorney) found a fatal flaw in the wording of the question on the strong mayor referendum that voters would face. Voters would actually be asked to decide two questions: (1) to abolish the current form of government and (2) to adopt the strong mayor alternative. That meant it was possible to vote yes on the first and no on the second, which would be nonsensical.

We pooled our funds and hired a lawyer, a municipal law specialist with experience in challenging ballot measures. He refined our challenge and laid the necessary groundwork to file it once the mayor formally filed his petitions. The mayor and his supporters knew of the potential legal challenge we were planning, but it is not clear that they actually believed that we would file it—or that we would be successful. Because challenges to this kind of ballot measure had to be filed in the circuit court and have a hearing that was essentially a full-blown

trial, perhaps they felt we didn't have the resources or nerve to do it and that we were just bluffing. If so, they were dead wrong. We filed our challenge with the circuit court, and we were confident that we would win.

By this time, the atmosphere in town was very tense—it was like a game of chicken and the question was who would swerve first. On the day of the hearing, the courtroom was packed, and the tension was palpable. Interestingly, even some key village employees sat on our side of the courtroom. To everyone's surprise, just as the court clerk called the case, the mayor's lawyer stepped forward and told the judge that the strong mayor petition was being withdrawn. The mayor swerved first. The judge suggested that she was likely to have ruled against the mayor had the petition not been withdrawn. We and the other opponents of the mayor's attempted coup d'état prevailed and did so publicly. A second battle won.

Even though we won this battle, the mayor and his supporters weren't going away (and neither were the anti-home rule people). The mayor said he wasn't giving up on the strong mayor idea and would pursue other avenues to the same end—primarily through changes in village ordinances, which of course needed village council approval. As a result, the April 2005 elections for village council took on a special importance. The mayor could increase his strength on the council and further his strategy, but the election also gave us opportunity to elect good people and thwart the mayor. In other words, the game was on if we wanted to play. The publicity surrounding our successful challenges to the two very different referenda positioned us well and helped to announce the existence of our group—now formalized as the Community Advocates.

### **Staying Organized: The Community Advocates Are Born**

We learned some very important lessons about the political environment created by the mayor since his initial election. Two stood out: (1) Combating the mayor and his agenda required a strategy of our own, and (2) a successful strategy needed a sustained organization because it would involve working over a number of elections. While we were challenging the two referendum matters, we decided to formalize our working group and create our own organization—the Community Advocates—and I became the president. Those challenges were actually our first formal actions as an organization and stood as our announcement that we intended to be a major player in the public life of the community. With the success of the strong mayor challenge we also learned—and hopefully others saw—that the mayor was not invincible and his success not inevitable. He could be beaten. For all his strengths, there were serious weaknesses that could be exploited. He and his supporters were a living example of hubris.

We had to find a way to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the mayor, starting with the kind of organization we wanted to create. It was our

first strategic challenge. Since we would be a good government group, we quickly ruled out involvement in partisan political matters. Since we assumed that our resources would be limited, we could not involve ourselves in every matter. We agreed that our group would be active in nonpartisan, local elections and in local elections involving referenda of special importance. We agreed to focus our energies where we could be most effective rather than weigh in on every issue. We'd have more credibility if we chose our battles carefully.

We wanted to send an important symbolic message by the makeup of our group. The Advocates needed to form a stark contrast to the mayor and his supporters in order to drive the narrative and win the battle over ideas. We also wanted to be a stark contrast to those in town—like the anti-home rule group—who reflexively oppose everything and offer few, if any, constructive ideas. To establish our credibility, the Advocates was designed to be a diverse group of residents with substantial experience in community service and wide connections throughout the community. In short, we wanted to show that we knew what we were talking about. Among those involved were current or past members of the village council (including a former mayor), the park board, the library board, the school boards, and other community groups (including the League of Women Voters). In addition, to have the widest appeal and to provide an alternative to the highly partisan political environment the mayor was creating, we consciously included Republicans, Democrats, and independents along with members of some of the larger churches in town.

Having decided on the kind of organization, the next challenge was the name. This challenge carried great symbolic importance because we needed to position our group in the community's eyes. The wrong choice could be disastrous. Above all, we wanted to emphasize the organization's reason for being—the best interests of the community. Accordingly, having the word "community" in the group's name seemed obvious. It would be a clear signal of what we're about and what we're not about. It is community that drives us, not personal, political, or other ambitions, not the interests of some larger group like a political party, a commercial interest, or those contributing money to political campaigns.

Tougher still was the choice of the word to describe what we wanted to do. We did not want to be mere boosters or watchdogs. We saw a need for leadership, and we wanted to be actively engaged in the important issues ourselves rather than leave the engagement to others. Since we saw ourselves as representing or advocating the community's interests, the word "advocates"—like the word "community"—seemed a good choice. It would best describe our reasons for organizing because an advocate speaks not for him- or herself but for some cause or issue. That cause or issue was the community, amply demonstrated by the diverse group of people organizing the Advocates. We believed that "Community Advocates" sent the right symbolic message as a key part of our strategy.

By the beginning of 2005, we had begun putting together a website and mapping out our basic plan, which would take us through a number of election

cycles. Our ultimate target was defeating the mayor, but the immediate target was the upcoming village council election. Three council seats would be contested, and our goal was to deny the mayor a working majority on the council in light of his interest in changing the village government. Our most important initial decision was to formally endorse candidates for the village council election: The Advocates began scouting likely candidates. We hoped that if we put our name and support behind the right kind of candidates they would have a better chance of success.

In preparation for the endorsement of candidates, we conducted our own background research on them. We decided to send a short questionnaire to announced candidates asking about general background information (education, job history, etc.) along with experience in the community and public service activities. Our research went further than just those areas, and in the case of one candidate—one of the mayor's strong supporters—we became aware of what we believed to be a serious problem (more on that later).

Before making our endorsements, we planned a public forum at which we asked candidates a series of questions about their reasons for running and about the issues we believed to be the most important. Our per-endorsement plan also included an informational mailing to people we identified as "super voters," those who had voted in the past three local elections. We saw those people as most likely to vote in the upcoming election, and targeting them was the most efficient and sensible use of our meager resources. Using a list obtained from the county board of elections of all registered voters in town and some of our own time and effort, we were able to cull the super voters from that list. The informational piece we mailed to them was a simple, single sheet that reminded the recipients of the upcoming election, included the names of all those running for office, and provided some basic information on the Advocates (mailings with our endorsements would come later). It was another way to announce our existence, who we are, and what we are about—and that we would be active in the election.

Once we made our endorsements, we did a variety of things to publicize the endorsements and help those candidates, including a press release that was ready to go the day of the endorsements. Shortly after the endorsements were announced, we scheduled a well-publicized "meet and greet" so that interested voters could spend time talking with our endorsed candidates. Regardless of attendance, the publicity surrounding the event—both before and after—was the key. The Advocates also put together a mailing sent to our list of voters announcing our endorsements, placed a series of advertisements in the local newspapers, and sent a postcard to voters the weekend before the election with our endorsements. The postcard also told voters to take it with them when they went to the polls.

Although our techniques are not unique, two things were important: our consistent message and our way of spreading it. In fact, the latter was itself a

part of the narrative and the contrast we wanted to make to the mayor. Our initial informational mailing was scrupulously neutral. We conducted an open and public forum that was nonconfrontational and to which all candidates were invited and attended. All were treated in a respectful, professional manner. When the endorsements were made, we simply announced them without saying anything negative about those we did not endorse. The meet and greet for endorsed candidates was well-publicized and open to the public—and free. Our mailings, press releases, and advertisements were well designed yet simple, informational, and inexpensive. There were no slick, multicolor brochures. The fact that we were able to do these things stands as evidence of the need that any similar organization you design must be well run.

As I noted above, one of the candidates the Advocates did not endorse was a strong supporter of the mayor. He was a leader in a local men's club that involved itself in a variety of community issues, including political matters. Additionally, if someone was facing harassment for their political opposition to the mayor or his agenda, some club members were among those who supplied the harassment. In doing research on the candidates, the Advocates learned that this candidate had sent to and shared with club members a number of e-mails that an outside observer could consider to be sexually charged, misogynist, and even bigoted. A number of these e-mails became public and were made available to the press. They raised serious questions about this candidate's character and his ability to appropriately represent residents who were not just like him. The candidate made no apologies for the substance of the e-mails and instead defended them as private correspondence within a club. Some of the candidate's (and the mayor's) supporters came to his defense and lashed out at his critics, questioning their motives. I was among those critics singled out for censure.

There was, however, more to the story, and it came out after the candidate's supporters (including a former village council member who was also one of the mayor's key operatives) began their aggressive and public defense of the candidate's character and fitness for office. It was a long-past arrest record and conviction. In itself, an arrest and even a conviction from years past isn't necessarily a problem. It depends on the specifics—the nature of the offense and its seriousness. And of course, it depends on whether the candidate is the one who brings it up. We learned that this candidate pleaded guilty to a very embarrassing misdemeanor charge centering on a public sex act that placed some of the sexually charged e-mails he shared with his club members in a new light. After reviewing the official record, the local newspaper reported on the specifics. The mayor, needless to say, tried to distance himself from his candidate. However, despite his claim not to really know this candidate, the local newspaper also reported on the close ties between this candidate and the mayor.

We never understood why the mayor backed this candidate and why he, the candidate, and their supporters thought that none of this would become public. If nothing else, it would cause great embarrassment for the candidate and his

family. Needless to say, they all looked ridiculous when the guilty plea material became public in light of the earlier defenses. When asked, the Advocates indicated that in our view the best course for the candidate would be to withdraw from the race. He eventually ended his campaign after the information about his guilty plea became public. Because he waited too long to formally withdraw, his name remained on the ballot, and he finished dead last.

Once that candidate's full criminal record became public, the mayor and his supporters reacted quite strongly, even attempting to have some members of the Advocates arrested for extortion and harassment because we suggested that the candidate end his campaign. They blamed everything on the Advocates—making the e-mails public and turning the guilty plea material over to the press. To this day I do not know who made the material public or who supplied the material to the press. Not surprisingly, the local police and the county prosecutor's office declined to do anything since there was no evidence of a crime. If nothing else, having the mayor and his supporters place all blame on the Advocates and come after us so aggressively did suggest that we were now seen as a major adversary. It was an interesting sign of our success and potential influence—even if we were “goo-goos.”

All of the candidates endorsed by the Advocates for the village council, as well as for the park board and the school boards, won in the spring 2005 election. Some of us paid a price for this success at the hands of the mayor's supporters, including being personally attacked at length by the brother-in-law of the candidate with the criminal record during the public comment section of two televised village council meetings. Of course, such personal attacks during the public comment section of a council meeting can only go on if the mayor allows them since he is the presiding officer. As personally painful as these activities were to us, they served our strategy and our narrative well. We didn't have to publicize the tactics used by the mayor and his supporters—their activities spoke for themselves. To the very end of the mayor's second term and his resounding defeat, the mayor and his supporters never seemed to realize that they were the best spokesmen for the Advocates, our message, and our goals. They were the political gift that just kept giving—they were the gang that couldn't shoot straight.

### **It Is a Continuing Strategy—Not Just One Election**

Because the Advocates does not see ourselves as an organization weighing in on every local issue, but only the most important ones, the Advocates largely withdrew from visible activity after the 2005 elections. This did not mean that we ceased operations. We invested money and time in our website, which we now maintained on an ongoing basis. Among ourselves, we continued to monitor local events and to talk to people in our respective networks to keep some



momentum alive. In early 2006, we decided to become visibly active again. Another anti-home rule referendum petition emerged from the same group that pushed the earlier one. This group was quite persistent, and they wanted to place the same question on the March 21, 2006, primary ballot.

This time they succeeded in getting more than enough signatures, but the Advocates again filed an objection. If nothing else, we wanted to send the message that this was an issue the Advocates thought was so important that we were always prepared to fight. This time we alleged that there were so many irregularities in the sheets of signatures, some bordering on fraud, that all the signatures should be rejected and the question not placed on the ballot. Despite painstaking examination of every signature and every sheet of signatures, our objection was not successful this time. There is some room for judgment by the election board in weighing the evidence in such a challenge, and it probably didn't help that the mayor chairs the village election board. In the view of some of the Advocates, the mayor's position would be better served if the measure made it onto the ballot but was defeated and he could be the key actor responsible.

While the Advocates were preparing their formal challenge to the ballot measure, we were also doing the necessary research and strategizing to defeat the question if it was placed on the ballot—and we were working with other activists and groups who shared our concerns. Collectively, the pro-home rule coalition made a strong, easily understandable, and well-communicated factual case on the merits for our town to keep home rule. We used multiple mailings and paid ads in the local newspapers to present factual information on the costs and benefits of removing home rule—especially the change in what residents would pay in property taxes, which would increase despite the claims of the anti-home rule forces.

Looking forward to the 2007 mayoral election, the Advocates had to make sure something else was a part of the campaign narrative. The anti-home rule forces focused on the idea that withdrawing power from the village government was the only way to stop the kinds of public projects to which they objected—especially the parking garage mentioned earlier. It was the only way in their view because—to no one's surprise but theirs—they had utterly failed in the electoral arena. Knowing by this time that there was growing dissatisfaction with the mayor and his actions, the home rule opponents were hoping to capitalize on that dissatisfaction by arguing that you can never “vote the bums out.” In contrast, the Advocates strongly emphasized in communications and campaign materials the idea that the voters can and should vote the bums out, not cripple for years to come the village government's ability to deal with local matters adequately and appropriately. Given the Advocates' growing visibility and success by this time, we hoped that enough voters would take our argument to heart. Because of the efforts of the Advocates and other community-minded activists, the home rule question was overwhelmingly defeated—over 70 percent of those voting voted to keep home rule.

The Advocates hoped that our role in defeating the anti-home rule referendum would help lay some groundwork for a campaign to defeat the mayor in the 2007 election by strengthening our position in local politics. We were becoming more optimistic about the chances, and some information we garnered regarding the mayor buoyed our hopes and affected our planning. We heard informally from a reliable source that some county Republican leaders saw our mayor as a problem and that his prospects for political advancement outside our town were slim. In other words, he was seen as a problem, but he was our problem—meaning our town's problem. He might not find greater opportunity outside of our town, but whether he had a future in our town was up to the town. The message appeared to be that a move to defeat him at the next election would be fine—presuming, of course, the challenge was not a move by the Democrats to invade traditionally Republican territory. Some of us saw an opportunity—the mayor really was politically vulnerable.

Because our plan in trying to defeat the mayor in the 2007 election was to focus on his ethics and style of governing, the Advocates continued monitoring the mayor's fund-raising activities and spending. We were particularly interested in who contributed large amounts to the mayor and whether they received benefits from the village (such as a sales tax rebate for a business) or did business with the village (such as a no-bid contract for professional services of some kind). Although Illinois had no limits on campaign contributions or spending for local elections at that time, there were regular and detailed reporting requirements for both. In addition, municipal contracts of any kind are public information, and the village is required to have a public notice published annually that indicates the identity of all contractors and the value of each contract. Any special benefits granted to a local business—such as a sales tax rebate to a car dealer as an inducement to locate or stay in the village—must be passed by the village council in an open meeting. With a little work and perseverance we were able to match contributions to contracts and benefits, and it yielded important ammunition for the upcoming mayoral election. Indeed, it appeared that “pay-to-play” had come to town.

The broader political context at the time had the potential to help our plan. The federal prosecutor in Chicago had recently won a string of high-profile political corruption convictions. Many involved Chicago Democratic officeholders and political operatives, but not all. An equal opportunity prosecutor, he went after Republicans as vigorously as Democrats. In the spring of 2006, the corruption investigations reached the highest level of political office in Illinois with the conviction of former Illinois governor George Ryan, a Republican. A key to the prosecution was the testimony of Ryan's former chief aide—a member of a prominent Republican family in our county. This local boy had earlier pleaded guilty to corruption charges and was serving time in a federal prison. Other members of Ryan's administration had also been convicted or pleaded guilty to corruption charges. News reports of federal investigations, trials, and

convictions in the Chicago area continued throughout the fall of 2006 and into the beginning of the campaign season for local elections in the spring of 2007.

While the mayor was building his campaign war chest—it would hit \$100,000 and then some—the Advocates began scouting potential candidates who shared our goals to run for mayor and for the three village council seats that would be contested (again, even if the mayor won reelection, we wanted to deny him a council majority). It was important for us to find serious, compelling candidates because this election was crucial and potentially brutal. We believed that the mayor could be beat, but we had to convince potential candidates to agree and that we could help them. We had already laid the groundwork for the election’s narrative—ethics, money, and pay-to-play.

We were successful in recruiting candidates, including two potentially strong mayoral candidates—one a sitting village council member and the other a former longtime member of the school board. Eventually the sitting council member filed to run for mayor, and the former school board member filed for village council. The Advocates and others believed this was the best arrangement politically because the sitting council member was a Republican and the former school board member a Democrat. Running a known Democrat against the mayor would be to the mayor’s advantage and play to his political strengths. Running a known Republican could substantially neutralize these advantages. Running a Republican smart enough to visit local and regional Republican officeholders, explain his candidacy, and ask not for their support but their neutrality in the election would be especially effective in neutralizing the mayor’s advantages. Paint the election as a purely local matter involving a problematic mayor that was best left to the town’s residents to sort out (the candidate we supported did all those things).

In encouraging candidates to run, we assured them of our help if we endorsed them, including access to the results of a survey we were planning. We took a random sample of 1,000 names from our list of super voters (making sure that no more than one voter in each household was in the sample) and then mailed each a one-page questionnaire about specific issues of concern in town as well as more general questions. The latter were designed to elicit people’s views about local campaign financing and spending, the traits and experiences they valued in local officials, and partisanship in local politics. Each mailing included the questionnaire, a cover letter from the Advocates explaining who we were and what the survey was about, and a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. With minimal follow-up we had a 51 percent response rate.

This survey was at the heart of our plan for the election, and it had a number of purposes in addition to providing information to the candidates we supported. First and foremost, its purpose was to lay out the narrative we wanted to guide the election and set the terms of debate. If we could control the battle over ideas, the candidates we supported had a better chance of winning. The survey was sent out early in the fall, well before the December filing deadline for

candidates and well before much active campaigning. In short, we wanted to be out there first.

The survey asked nothing about specific candidates or officeholders—only about the issues noted above, as well as some demographic information on respondents. In addition to getting information on people’s attitudes, we wanted to get them thinking and talking about these issues in the context of the upcoming local election. It was not a question of changing people’s attitudes—we didn’t believe we could accomplish that or, more importantly, that we needed to. Given the broader political context at the time and the general disgust in the Chicago area over corruption, along with the growing impatience with highly partisan political warfare, we believed all we needed was to turn that general disgust and growing impatience to local concerns. In other words, we needed to channel what we believed to already be there.

Receiving over 500 usable responses with no real follow-up sent a clear message to us. The Advocates was an excellent brand despite attempts by the mayor and his supporters to discredit us collectively and individually. People—or at least those who pay the most attention to local affairs and vote most often—cared about the issues we believed to be important. They believed that a candidate’s integrity, character, and independence are very important, whereas a candidate’s party affiliation, age, and gender are not. Money in campaigns bothered them, with most saying that contributions should only come from people in town rather than interests from outside the town. When it came to how much a candidate spends, less was clearly preferred: 44 percent thought \$10,000 was too much, 76 percent thought \$25,000 was too much, and 88 percent thought \$50,000 was too much. By the end of 2006, the mayor’s campaign fund was approaching \$100,000. Forty-two percent said they did not have confidence in public officials, only 24 percent said they did, and the remainder weren’t sure. A full 80 percent of the respondents agreed that the town needed an ethics ordinance.

Once we had those 500 surveys, we began running the numbers and publicizing some of the findings. We posted them on the Advocates website, placed some in a press release, shared a few with other groups, included still others in a mailing to the super voters, and began to share the findings with potential candidates. Again, we wanted to drive the narrative for the upcoming election, and we succeeded. The combination of the information we uncovered on the connections between contributions to the mayor’s campaign fund and certain benefits, and the findings of our survey, made a compelling narrative.

The narrative quickly took on a life of its own. Others started looking at the available public records and making additional connections that pointed to pay-to-play politics. When those findings were publicized, village council members not up for reelection began talking about the issue during village council meetings, even raising questions about specific contributions and specific contracts or benefits. One council member referred to a specific contribution as “tithing”

because it amounted to 10 percent of the value of the contract with the village. In addition, one of the people running for a council seat (and backed by the mayor and his supporters) provided more grist for the mill. He had made a number of sizable contributions to the mayor's campaign fund, and his firm had consulting contracts with the village—contracts in the past and at least one that was current at the time. At first this candidate failed to understand the issue because he didn't see the need for his firm to stop doing business with the village. Initially, the mayor tried to ignore the money/ethics issue, believing it was a nonissue despite the visibility it had been getting. His professionally designed campaign centered on a picture of him as a civic-minded public servant who had successfully accomplished much while keeping taxes low. His campaign also wanted to control the narrative, but it couldn't. Too much of the discussion centered on factual matters in the public record that could not easily be explained by the mayor or his supporters. Whenever they tried, someone would go to the publicly available records and contradict them, which only gave more credence to our narrative and eroded the mayor's credibility. Some of the mayor's own attempts to explain things away at candidate forums would be videotaped and put on YouTube and then contrasted to information from the public record.

Perhaps the most damaging item was an analysis of the mayor's fund-raising and spending reports that appeared as an ad in the local newspaper, paid for by a local group. It showed that the mayor raised over \$500,000 since his initial election and spent over \$400,000. Less than 5 percent of those funds came from individuals living in town. Most came from businesses. As to a claim made by some of the mayor's supporters that a substantial amount of the money raised actually went to local charities, the ad showed that less than 7 percent went to charities or nonprofits. Six percent went to purchase tickets for the mayor to attend sporting events. More was paid to a business co-owned by the mayor for services performed for his campaign. Each time the mayor or his supporters tried to respond to the money/ethics issue, his credibility eroded more.

The election was perhaps the most intense in recent years, featuring more than its share of crude tactics by the mayor, his supporters, and the outside political consultant used by the mayor's campaign. The Advocates followed the same basic plan we had used in the 2005 election, putting out various flyers and advertisements, running e-mails and content on our website, holding a candidate forum, and making endorsements. All the candidates we endorsed for village council won, as did our endorsed mayoral candidate. In fact, he won an overwhelming victory, beating the mayor by a 2 to 1 margin. His campaign was built around the idea of change—that it was time to change the way things were done in town. A key platform issue for him was the need for an ethics ordinance.

Another key to his campaign was the people he attracted to work on it. Some members of the Advocates moved over to help run his campaign, as did some of those people involved in fighting the strong mayor referendum. The new mayor was able to effectively mobilize discontent. He helped to bring a

new set of younger people into local politics, which was important because it would help sustain the victory and the long-term prospects for our goals. The now former mayor and his supporters had been defeated, but they weren't leaving town.

After the 2007 election victories, the Advocates again withdrew from public visibility, but we did not ignore what was happening. We had helped to vote the bums out and bring about a major change in town government—or at least the potential for major change. It was time to wait and see if the potential proved real. One of the first real tests was the promised ethics ordinance, and one was indeed passed that was stricter than any in surrounding communities and stricter than the state's requirements. There was also a noticeable, positive change in the style of leadership during the council meetings and in village affairs more generally. We regrouped in the fall of 2008 in preparation for the spring 2009 local elections. There would be park board and school board elections, but most importantly three village council seats would be on the ballot, giving us an opportunity to consolidate the gains of 2007 and keep the former mayor from gaining ground back.

The Advocates had developed a successful model for influencing local elections, but now there was one big difference. We were not on the offensive, mounting an attack on something that needed substantial change. Instead, we wanted to protect and consolidate the gains made with a new mayor who had a solid majority on the village council. The biggest threat was likely to come from the former mayor, who continued to have a hard time accepting and understanding his staggering loss. A number of names circulated as possible candidates, including some well-known, close supporters of the former mayor. When the filing deadline came in December, none of those visible players filed their candidacy for the village council election (one most likely because he would be asked about his business dealings in town). The former mayor put up only one candidate, even though three council seats would be contested. Although a long-time resident, this candidate was a virtual unknown, with no record in community affairs aside from a recent appointment as a Republican precinct committeeman. He was one of the weakest candidates to run in a council election in recent years, and he came in dead last despite the active support of the former mayor, his supporters, and the township Republican Party. Needless to say, the three candidates endorsed by the Advocates won. This meant that after the 2009 election, the mayor and the other six members of the village council were candidates who sought and received the Advocates' endorsement and support.

### **The Challenge of Success**

The Advocates now face an interesting challenge in terms of strategy. We helped to completely change municipal government. We won almost every time we

entered an election as an active player. Since our first foray into local electoral politics in 2005, only two candidates we endorsed—one for a school board and one for the park board—lost. We had achieved our original goal. Did this mean we could retire from the field? No, because one all-important lesson we learned was that although the opposition may not be very smart and may have lost in a series of elections, they weren't going away. If we retire from the field, they will happily step in and retake the ground they lost.

The Advocates need to rethink our strategy to maintain the gains we made. It will be especially challenging because we need to do it in a completely different fiscal environment than the one in existence just a few years ago. The change has to do with the nation's severe economic downturn. Local governments have been hit hard in Illinois because much of their revenue is tied to taxes that are very sensitive to economic conditions, especially sales taxes. Like many, the village council is struggling with the budget cuts that must be made in the face of sudden drops in revenue. We have not yet come up with a strategy and a narrative for maintaining good government and the quality of life in our community in the worst economic conditions in recent memory. That is our current challenge.

In reality, one overarching lesson is that you never fully reach your goal. It's just an ongoing series of battles. It's a lesson best summarized in the phrase that serves as the refrain in a well-known song by Texas singer-songwriter Robert Earl Keen: "The road goes on forever and the party never ends."