

Ellison, Democrats post solid wins by mobilizing grassroots voters

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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With the election a month behind, already Democrats and Republicans are looking ahead to 2014 and 2016.

But in looking ahead, both sides must first look back and analyze their successes and failures of this most recent election.

Here in Minneapolis, one big success was in the safely Democratic 5th Congressional District – the seat currently held by Rep. Keith Ellison. And though Ellison’s seat was considered safe from any Republican challenger (Ellison defeated his opponent, Chris Fields, by more than 173,000 votes), Ellison ran as if he were in a neck and neck race. But according to the congressman, his efforts to energize the vote were less about him, but more about defeating two state ballot initiatives and re-electing Barack Obama. The grassroots get-out-the-vote efforts in Minnesota’s 5th, in many ways mirrored efforts in more tenuous swing states such as Florida and Ohio – two states that also dealt with perceived voter suppression tactics initiated by Republicans.

“We set a campaign goal to increase voter turnout by five percent in the 5th (District),” said Ellison, who said his office worked closely with the offices of State Sen. Elect, Bobby Joe Champion, State Sen. Jeff Hayden and others. “We door knocked or called 750,000 people.”

In the recent election just over 262,000 people voted for Ellison, up almost 33,000 from 2008 when he ran during a national election. His vote total was the highest for any Congressional candidate in the state – a feat of great notice due to the district previously having been known for poor voter turnout.

Ellison credited his campaign manager, Will Hailer, for a large part of the mobilization efforts in the 5th – particularly in North Minneapolis and Brooklyn Park. “We realized early on we had to get inside the apartment buildings to talk to voters, and that wasn’t an easy thing. Will (Hailer) did a lot of work talking to apartment managers making sure we had access to the residents,” said Ellison.

“We hired an apartment organizer whose sole job was to register apartment dwellers,” said Hailer, who said apartments were fertile grounds for new voters. “Only about 50 percent of people living in apartments are registered voters.”

Hailer said the Ellison team used a technique known as a “reverse knock.” In traditional door knocking, campaigns use a VAN (voter activation network) list to determine registered voters and target those voters. “With the reverse knock, we looked for units that weren’t in the VAN and targeted them because we knew they were not registered,” said Hailer.

Hailer said the campaign also reached out to voters during non-traditional hours to reach voters who worked second and third shift.

“We did it the old-fashioned way,” said Hailer.

Registering voters was just one piece of the puzzle – getting people out to the polls was

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another.

Ellison and Hailer said the keys in this past election were the two proposed amendments to the state's Constitution – one to require voters to show a state-issued photo ID at the polls and another that called for a ban on gay marriage.

“Our mission was to defeat these two ballot initiatives,” said Ellison.

Ellison and Hailer credited voter enthusiasm – especially in North Minneapolis – to a spirited DFL primary, in particular for the state House seat in 59B. In that race Raymond Dehn defeated Terra Cole by the narrowest of margins with Ian Alexander garnering a great deal of support, largely in the Bryn Mawr neighborhood. “Each candidate had a passionate base,” said Hailer.

Hailer said following the August primaries, Ellison called on all the candidates to work together with the common goal of defeating the two ballot questions before voters in November.

“We wanted to rally the people around an idea and not a person,” said Hailer.

That idea was the perceived stripping of rights by Republican forces. Ellison said the adding of the proposed voter ID and gay marriage amendments showed the state GOP (and GOP as a whole) demonstrated a lack of caring for a majority of voters.

“I think the GOP demonstrated contempt for the numbers of poor, the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community – for blacks and Latinos,” said Ellison. “You look at a group that is a block of the Democratic base and I guarantee you within the last year Republicans have said something bad about them.”

According to the Congressman, efforts to suppress the vote in communities of color actually had an opposite effect. Ellison said though a lot of money went into pro-voter ID movements nationwide, “Grassroots efforts showed that you can't just drop massive amounts of money into a campaign. Our massive numbers can beat their massive money. This is huge, this is big.”