

Suggestions on How to Run a Socialist Political Campaign

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In 2010 I was the Socialist Party candidate in Ohio for the U.S. Senate, receiving 25,000 votes or 0.68 percent in November 2010. This was one of the most successful Socialist Party campaigns in recent history and compared favorably with other recent socialist campaigns, with other campaigns over the years by other left parties, and with the campaigns of other parties to the left of the Democrats.

While very specific conditions in Ohio made this campaign possible, still I think there may be some general lessons to be learned from the experience. I share some thoughts about my campaign as a contribution to future Socialist Party campaigns and other socialist campaigns. I recognize that we have not had many socialist campaigns in recent years, and I am sure that more will be learned from other socialist campaigns in coming years.

(I have written a description and evaluation of my 2010 Senate campaign for those who are interested. It is published in the Winter 2010 issue of *New Politics: A Journal of Socialist Thought*.)

Be sure of your relationship to your party.

I think it is important for any Socialist Party candidate to be sure of and secure in their identity as the party's candidate. I ran as the candidate of the Socialist Party USA for several reasons.

- First, the Socialist Party has the historic name associated with socialist leaders Eugene V. Debs and Norman Thomas. While I identify more politically with the former than the latter (both have their strengths and weaknesses), I thought it was important to me to run as the candidate associated with the socialist tradition in the United States.
- Second, when I read the Socialist Party USA principles and platform, I found that I could whole heartedly endorse and advocate them without any qualms. This is the socialism that I believe in.
- Third, the Socialist Party had a ballot line in Ohio (the result of a court decision) which made it easier to become a candidate, as well as a national staff committed to supporting the campaign, as well as some valuable experience and some important contacts.

It was important to me to run as a socialist, to know that I could rely on the Socialist Party and that it could rely on me.

Have a Clear Understanding of Why You Are Running for Office

At this moment in American history, a Socialist Party campaign for high office such as the U.S. Senate is not about winning. Do not delude yourself that you have a chance to win this time around. The socialist movement is too weak and the Socialist Party and other left organizations are too small to mobilize the forces to defeat the corporate, capitalist parties. So why do we run for office?

- We run to educate the American public and particularly the working class and other groups about socialism.
- We run to build the socialist movement and to create a socialist culture.
- We run to help to create good relations between socialists and between socialists, the labor movement and social movements. We want to strengthen and link networks of activists.
- We run as part of a long term project of building an independent political party of working people and their allies with socialist politics here in the United States.
- We run to get votes as a way of measuring the support that socialism has in the society and in the working class.

If you run as a traditional and typical candidate simply to win votes for yourself and your party, you are not doing the job that we as socialists want to do. Our job is to continue our basic educational and organizational tasks through the use of the electoral campaign.

Establish your Identity and Persona

You must establish your public identity for the campaign. I have had what some call a long and varied work history and what others would call a checkered career. I think this is common among activists and increasingly common among many Americans. Over the years I have worked at many jobs, including social worker, steel worker, truck driver, journalist, community organizer, college professor, writer, interpreter and most recently school teacher. For ten years before the year I filed as a candidate, I had been a college professor teaching U.S. and Mexican history and might have gone with that title, since I had only worked for one year as a school teacher for a year. Or I might have called myself “a teacher, writer and activist” as I had for years on the taglines of articles and books I had written. I could also have portrayed myself as a “longtime agitator.”

I decided, however, to take my current job title “school teacher” (or sometimes I said “elementary school Spanish teacher”) and adopt that as my identity. Not only was this simple and straightforward, but I felt that that my job identified me with working people who get up and go to work every morning. Despite the rightwing politicians’ and media attack on teachers, people still respect and admire teachers, and I thought that would be helpful for the campaign.

One must also establish a persona, a public personality. Some of my friends and co-thinkers advised me to be an “angry man” or even a radical “wild man,” lashing out against the government, corporations and the Tea Party. I could have chosen that persona that and could have carried it off. I thought, however, that here in Ohio, in the Midwest, where there was little class or social struggle, but where people were looking for answers to their problems and wondering what socialism is, that that would be the wrong approach. I could be ridiculed as just another crazy like some of the Tea Party types.

I decided against that “angry radical” persona and opted to be the mild-mannered, serious, idealistic and optimistic critic of the system who was posing a rational alternative. Similarly, I did not opt for the “working man” image as I might have, wearing the blue collar work shirt and blue jeans. Mostly I wore the traditional sports coat and tie (except when I was at protests or on picketlines). I almost always wore the same blue sports jacket with the “No War” button and the same blue dress shirt so that people would remember me. I was not seeking respectability with the coat and tie, but I was trying to get a hearing from people unaccustomed to socialist candidates and their politics. I might add that some audiences, African Americans, for example, may be offended and find it disrespectful if a candidate does not put on his Sunday best to come speak to them.

The point is that your public identity and your public persona are choices that you can make and can perhaps even alter during the campaign if you feel that you have made a mistake. You want to establish an identity and a persona that you feel comfortable with, that will stick in the public mind, and that will be appropriate to the level of struggle and the discourse taking place in your state.

Your Commitment, Example, and Modeling

As a candidate you must be the hardest working person in your campaign team, an example and a model to your staff and supporters. The job is incredibly challenging. A candidate for public office on the state level can be busy 24 hours of the day. If you have a job, this will be like taking on a second job. If you don’t work because you’re retired or are a student, running for office will be like suddenly taking on two jobs.

You will spend hours traveling, attending meetings, speaking, filling out media questionnaires, doing newspaper, radio and TV interviews. You will spend hours talking with your staff, your local leaders, and other supporters. You will want to be present at all sorts of protests, demonstrations, and picketlines. When not doing those things, you will be writing your blog or other literature for your campaign.

As the candidate your demonstrated commitment to the campaign will inspire your staff and supporters. You want to be an example to others of drive and hard work. With your staff, supporters and the public, you must not be aloof and yet you must carry yourself like a leader.

You want to use everything you do to be a model socialist leader, and that means modeling behavior to the young students, workers and activists who will come around your campaign.

Develop your Own Platform

I found that one of the most important things that I did was to write my own campaign platform. While I accepted the Socialist Party principles and platform and put a link to the party on my website, I thought I should work out my own positions on the kinds of important issues that a Senate candidate must address. I also thought it important to understand my own state of Ohio and its issues.

I wrote this platform in consultation with longtime friends and fellow activists from the labor movement, other social movements, and from Solidarity, the socialist group which I had belonged to for many years. I consulted other likeminded folks on the editorial board of *New Politics: A Journal of Socialist Thought*, an independent socialist magazine whose editorial board I also sit. I also constantly consulted the Socialist Party platform. In the end, my platform looked a lot like the party platform. But by taking the time to write a detailed platform, I prepared myself to be thoughtful, knowledgeable and confident when speaking to the media and the public and when preparing my talks and writing press releases. Of course that doesn't mean that I was a walking encyclopedia who knew the answers to everything, but it did mean that I had already wrestled with many, even most, of the questions that were posed to me in the course of the campaign, and was able to give solid, credible answers to those questions.

Create a Leadership Team

You must have a leadership team at the center of your campaign. While campaigning in Ohio, I met candidates from other parties on the left and right who seemed to be running virtually all alone without an organization to support them. Either they conceived of their candidacy as an individual enterprise or they did not understand the need to or have the ability to create a leadership team and an organization. I believe that simply running as an individual is a big mistake, because the result will be both a weak campaign and the failure to build a socialist movement and organization.

Who are the key players in a leadership team?

- **An attorney – An attorney is essential to a political campaign, to get on the ballot and win a measure of fairness in the election.** When I became interested in being the Socialist Party candidate for U.S. Senate, I learned that the party had the support of an expert attorney in the state capital of Columbus, a person deeply committed to political democracy and defending ballot access and fairness in the election process. He was also willing to work pro bono. I would not have considered running if that attorney had not already been in place. While he was not a member of the SP (or of any other political party), in my own mind I considered him a member of our team because I knew he could be counted on to conscientiously fight to defend our rights.
- **A Treasurer – A Treasurer is an essential component of a leadership team with responsibility not only to look after your campaign funds, but also to handle reports to the Federal Election Commission (or in other cases to state officials).** When I decided to run for office, one of my friends and co-thinkers, who happened to divide his time between Cincinnati where he resided and Columbus where he worked, offered to be my treasurer. He has previous experience as a treasurer of various organizations and had some experience with fundraising. He was an absolutely trustworthy and committed person. One must have such a solid, sensible, and reliable person in your team as your treasurer.
- **A Fundraiser – Raising funds is one of the essential tasks of a political campaign. Ideally you want your campaign to be completely self-financing, living off the land, raising funds as it goes and grows. To do that you must have a fundraiser.** My treasurer acted as our lead person on fund-raising while my campaign coordinator handled many of the fundraising tasks. Ideally you would want one individual with fund-raising experience and contacts to do the job.
- **A Campaign Leader – A campaign needs a leader, a person who indicates the overall direction, sets the goals, prioritizes the use of resources, creates a kind of campaign culture, and makes all of the yes or no decisions.** Such a person is usually called a campaign manager. I decided that for my campaign that I would be that person. I believed I had both the intellectual and organizational experience to lead the campaign. At the same time, I felt that I could not find someone who would work fulltime for nine months to lead the campaign, since that would have to be a person I would absolutely trust politically and organizationally. I can imagine other circumstances where I might have hired a campaign manager, but it didn't happen on this occasion. Others might want to hire a campaign manager for their campaigns, but it must be someone who deeply shares your ideals, methods, and goals and it must be someone you trust absolutely and who has the same trust in you.
- **Campaign Staff – Every political campaign needs a professional staff, that is, someone paid to work fulltime on the campaign.** I hired a person to be my *campaign coordinator* or campaign organizer. While I set the general

direction, goals and priorities of the campaign, my campaign coordinator handled all of the campaign logistics. He created data bases, kept my calendar, organized our meetings, handled our campaign literature and paraphernalia. My campaign coordinator wrote regular reports on his activities, such as the campaign committee meetings he organized. *It is absolutely essential to have a paid, professional staff for your campaign if it is a big city, statewide or national campaign.* I believe that ideally one would invest funds in hiring as many professional staff as would be feasible and productive in a campaign. My campaign had only one such person. I and my campaign coordinator think in retrospect that we should have hired three more, one for each of the state's three biggest demographic areas. And we should have hired at least one of them much earlier in the campaign than we did.

- **An inner circle of trusted collaborators and advisors – You will need moral, psychological, intellectual, and political support from a group of close collaborators and advisors.** My wife, who shares my politics, was one of these for me, and I am sure that life partners are usually key collaborators in such campaigns. I also called upon other friends and longtime co-thinkers from the labor movement and other movements to help me to think about and carry out my campaign. I worked out everything I did both with the Socialist Party and with Solidarity, and those organizations helped to provide political support as well. As the campaign grew, I found came to know and trust others working with the campaign who also took on that role of trusted advisor.

Use Your Leadership Team to Build an Organization

A statewide campaign requires the building of a statewide organization. If your state has a strong Socialist Party organization with solid chapters in major cities and on campuses, then that can function as the skeleton of your organization. If not, then **you will want to do everything possible to create campaign committees in every city and on every campus in your state.**

In each committee you will want to have **one key person in each committee** who can be relied upon to make sure that the committee meets and does work for the campaign. Ideally **each committee would have at least 5 and ideally 10 members who form the core group** and are able to call upon many others to carry out the work.

The work of the committees consists of organizing meetings, handing out literature, speaking with the public, and doing other things to promote your campaign. The local committees also provide you local information on issues, on rival candidates, and on local opinion as they see it.

Your campaign manager and campaign staff are responsible for creating, building, maintaining, and activating these committees. You will locate the leaders and members of these committees by calling, emailing, telephoning and visiting leftists and movement activists in your state. In some cases you will need to recreate and rebuild the committees because the first attempt didn't work. **Your campaign staff will be in regular contact with the leaders and constantly nudging these committees.**

Every committee, contact and leader must be in your data base. Your leaders should all be on a data base of key leaders. All of your city and campus committee members should be in your data base. The data bases must be kept up to date, updated daily or at least every couple of days so that you can communicate with your supporters. As the candidate you want to communicate regularly with these committees to urge them on and to thank them for their support.

Building Alliances to Advance the Campaign and Socialism

The Socialist Party today in most states has too few branches and not enough members to build a big city, county or statewide organization. Consequently it seemed to me advisable **to attempt to build alliances with others on the left who share the commitment to democratic, revolutionary, international socialism as well as with others who share a commitment to building a working class social and political movement.** I found that my Ohio Socialist Party campaign for the U.S. Senate was able to build an alliance with Solidarity, the International Socialist Organization (ISO), the state chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), local Young Democratic Socialist (YDS) chapters, and with leaders and members of the Ohio State Labor Party (part of the Labor Party founded 20 years ago by Tony Mazzocchi). Members of those organizations became key to the campaign in Ohio in various cities and on different college campuses.

In working with those organizations, I established relations with either the national leaderships, as in the case of Solidarity and the ISO, or with the state leaderships as in the case of DSA and the OSLP. I worked to restrain competition between the groups, putting emphasis on our common goal of building a socialist movement. The cooperation we established in Ohio allowed us to put together a Socialist Contingent for the October 2 demonstration in Washington, D.C. which was also endorsed by other groups such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Action. Throughout the campaign and even afterwards, we had little or no friction between the groups. On the contrary, we established good will between them. Shortly before the

election about a dozen members of the SP, Solidarity and the ISO from Detroit and Toledo canvassed about 500 homes in Toledo, Ohio. I would urge other socialist candidate to look for ways to build cooperation on the left.

A Strategy Realistic and Priorities

You must develop a realistic strategy for your campaign and establish priorities for the use of your resources: time, money, and people. Most states are quite large, have many cities and towns, thousands of organizations, and millions of residents. You will receive scores of invitations to speak before all sorts of organizations, from local chambers of commerce and churches to senior citizen centers and schools. There will also be large public events—concerts, parades, fairs—held all over the state, as well as high traffic locations where one can always find thousands of people in motion: downtown streets, markets, public transportation terminals. The state is too big, there are too many people, and there is too much going on for you to reach everyone. So you must have a realistic strategy and set of priorities to figure out who you are trying to reach and how you will reach them.

Your strategy and priorities depend on your resources: time, money, and people. I found that as a working school teacher with a responsibility to my students and colleagues that I could not make most of the meetings to which I was invited because they were either held on work days and during work hours or they were being held in a city or town too far from where I live and work. I did not have the time to make most of these meetings and I did not have the money for travel either. We decided early on that our strategy would be to go for the low hanging fruit because we did not have the time, money, or people to reach farther or higher.

Focus on the big cities. We elected to focus on the states four largest metropolitan areas Cincinnati, Columbus, Toledo, and Cleveland which had most of the state's population, most of its working class population, most of its African Americans and Latinos, and most of its students. The four big cities also had most of the state's leftists, liberal voters, labor unions and social movements. These four areas also had most of the votes. We believed we would build and grow first among likely supporters and if we achieved critical mass (which we did not) then reach out to others.

Organize on college campuses. In addition to focusing on the four largest cities, we also made an effort to organize on campuses in small college towns. In Ohio many of these are small liberal arts schools with a traditionally progressive student body. On both small college campuses and on the big university campuses, one should try to establish a relationship with progressive student organizations—LGBT, environmental, pro-workers, anti-war—as they can organize public meetings on campus at which you can speak. We had several student groups which both organized meetings and set up literature tables on their campuses to distribute our materials.

I imagine that in most states one would do something similar even if one had greater resources because cities are key. We figured that by concentrating on these areas we would reach more supporters and gain more support might later be able to reach out to other areas geographic areas or sectors, but we never got to that point. This strategy meant that—with few exceptions—we ruled out all of rural Ohio, most of the state's counties and much of suburban Ohio (even though two-thirds of all Americans live in suburbs) because we knew those areas were more conservative. Similarly, while I ignored all chamber of commerce invitations, I spoke at the state NAACP meeting and two local NAACP chapter meeting.

A socialist campaign should work to get its message before labor union meetings and members and to workplaces. We unfortunately had little success in doing either of those, despite some very good attempts. It is worth revisiting our efforts to see if there is anything we could do the next time to be more successful.

Your Speech / Messaging

A candidate spends much of his or her time giving speeches and it is important to develop a basic speech. I think it best if this is an expandable and collapsible speech, kind of like an accordion, that can be given in lengths of from 5 to 50 minutes, depending on the time you are allotted. The speech should contain your basic political message, a message which speaks to the outstanding issues confronting the people to whom you are speaking. As a Senate candidate, I was speaking to the people of Ohio about national issues.

A speech cannot and should not usually address more than three issues or it gets too complicated. I chose the economy and jobs, the environment, and the wars. **You can perhaps discuss a few other things in the longer versions of your speech, but the core has got to be simple.** Among the other issues, I always mentioned the corporate character of the Republicans and Democrats which made it impossible for them to represent working people. I almost always talked about the importance of building an independent working class political party. And I almost always talked about the need to rebuild the labor and social

movements. I often compared our socialist movement to the abolitionist movement and the anti-slavery parties to our building of a socialist party.

As a candidate, you want to speak without notes and you certainly don't want to read a speech. The simplicity of your basic speech with its three points helps with that. After you have given the speech a few times, you will be able to give it without a thought, though you must never lose your passion in your public speaking.

Speak in ordinary language readily accessible to anyone without ever talking down to your audience. As a candidate for office speaking in public you will want to avoid any sort of jargon, whether academic or leftist. You will want to talk about what is happening in our society in a way that any person can understand, whether a worker, homemaker, or a student. As a candidate you are trying to persuade people that your party and your candidacy represent a rational alternative to the capitalist parties.

As a candidate you criticize the other major parties and their positions, but never make ad hominem remarks about other candidates. As a candidate on the left, I believe that should we attempt to avoid criticizing others on the left, even when we disagree with them, and certainly we do not enter into debates about other left groups and their theories and positions, as this will certainly turn off most audiences.

Presenting Socialism in America

One of the most important questions that arises in a campaign is this: How do we present the idea of democratic, revolutionary socialism to working people in the United States? At times it will be important to differentiate our positions from those of Soviet Communism or European Social Democracy so that our audience understands that we are for extending and deepening democracy, not trampling on it, and so that people understand that we think this country needs profound systemic change.

While we believe in nationalizing many industries and will say so, we recognize that a capitalist state nationalizing industry does not represent a step toward socialism. While we imagine that a workers' state, a socialist state may nationalize industry, we have to explain that that means the democratic control of industry together with elements of workers' control in the workplace. I found it useful to talk about our people democratically socializing industry, or digesting and transforming industry into a social enterprise.

Communications

Once you have your message you need to establish various ways to communicate with your supporters, with potential supporters and with voters and the general public. It is important that you have a professional looking and attractive website that can support several easily accessible pages. You will want to post on that website the following:

- Your biography. (A carefully conceived, carefully written version of the story of your Life consistent with the identity and persona you have decided upon.)
- Your platform together with the Socialist Party platform.
- Your blog.
- Newsroom with links to article, radio shows, and TV appearances on line.
- A basic video.
- A way to donate money to your campaign (Paypal and credit card, if you can, and post office box).
- A contact address.
- A calendar of your events.
- A link to the Socialist Party
- Downloads of your basic campaign literature.

You should also establish a Facebook page, a YouTube channel, a Twitter account and use other social media to keep your supporters informed of your activities. We found it very useful as well to create listservs to reach your supporters. We used a Flip camera to record many of our activities and post videos on YouTube.

Working the Media

You must work the media to get yourself covered. First, of course, you will need a **media data base** of local, state, and national media. You must send **them regular press releases**. You need to identify a few publications, blogs or whatever that will post your statements. You need to cultivate the media. You should spend time schmoozing with any reporter who is willing to listen to you. We found one reporter who wrote for syndication in the mainstream press who would

give regular coverage to our campaign and that was very important.

Literature

You must have a few basic pieces of campaign literature. You must create a few basic pieces of literature which explain succinctly who you are, what your stand for, and where to learn more.

I created a three-panel, two-sided brochure that gave my biography, my platform, and some other basic information for smaller events (dozens to hundreds). We had two versions of this, one for the primary and one for the November election. We also created small six-to-a-page leaflets that we could use for mass events (hundreds or thousands). We made some special leaflets for particular events and some translated into Spanish too.

We printed everything as cheaply as possible, black-and-white and on standard weight paper. **Your literature must be either union label or produced with labor donated.** We had our own high quality computer printer and most of our literature was printed labor donated though we also had some union label printing. You must have literature ready to go for every event you speak at because while handing a person a piece of literature you get to say a few words to them and perhaps enter into a conversation. The paper is the link to the contact with the other person.

Paraphernalia

You must be able to produce some of the standard campaign paraphernalia such as yard signs, bumper stickers, and buttons. You supporters will want to see that you are a real candidate and for many what makes you a real candidate will be your yard sign. Buttons and bumper stickers allow individuals to identify with and take a stand for our campaign. Yard signs too, but they also provide visibility and name recognition. **Your paraphernalia must be union label.**

Public events

As a candidate you want to choose those public events that you can attend, distribute your literature and talk to people. Given our limited resources and small core of supporters, we looked for large public events likely to be attended by African Americans, working class people, and more progressive voters. We produced a small, cheap leaflet that we distributed to everyone who attended such events, hundreds of even thousands of copies.

As we handed out the flyer, we said at least one sentence to everyone to whom we spoke: End the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and bring that money home to create jobs. We also chose to leaflet public markets, art fairs and other locations where we knew we would find sympathetic voters. We participated in a Fourth of July parade in a neighborhood in Cincinnati known for its counter-cultural and left-of-center voters, distributing thousands of leaflets.

Candidate forums

Candidate forums can be important events and you should choose the ones that make sense for your campaign. We avoided forums in rural areas, small towns, and conservative suburbs or those hosted by chambers of commerce and conservative groups. We looked for forums where we would speak to African American, working class, and progressive voters. Forums give you an opportunity to speak to usually 100 or more people at a time. Sometimes they may be videotaped either by the media or by the organizers and you may be able to link to those tapings. Newspapers often report on the forums and you can link to the stories and post on Facebook, for example.

Your Own Meetings

You will have to organize your own meetings, both meetings of your campaign committees and public meetings. As you travel around your state, you and your staff will want to meet regularly and repeatedly with your local supporters to keep them motivated, to share your experiences with them, and to learn from them how things are going. You want to hold public meetings, even if they are of modest size to take your message to the public and to continue to recruit new activists to your campaign. The meetings also help to recruit people to the socialist movement.

The Big Push

As you begin to come to the end of the campaign, say at the beginning of October, you will want to urge all of your committees to meet weekly and to make a big final push. Every committee and every supporter should be distributing literature, bumper stickers and button, and you should be putting up yard signs in conspicuous place around the state. We had

500 yard signs, only a few at individual homes, but about 100 each at important freeway on and off ramps and other such locations in five major cities.

GOTV

If you have a large enough campaign, you will want to have a real “get out the vote” effort.

Our campaign was pretty modest, but we did send emails and make calls to our supporters to make sure they voted on Election Day. That is certainly the minimum that can be done.

A Rewarding Experience

If you decide to run as a Socialist Party candidate and do so with commitment and vigor, you will find it a rewarding experience I am sure. I traveled throughout the state, met and talked with hundreds and hundreds of people, helped to build the labor and social movement politics, and recruited people to the socialist movement and to the SP. I wish you all the best with your candidacy.