

The [Un]coordinated Campaign in 2004:  
The Mahoning County Democratic Party, Kerry Freelancers,  
527 Committees, and Organized Labor

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Former Democratic National Committee Chair Ron Brown, who built upon the groundwork laid by his predecessors, is credited with instituting the Coordinated Campaign (Margolis and Green 1993), which is “an infrastructure designed to mobilize the vote (Corrado 1996: 69). Its initial objectives were to strengthen the national party thereby creating a dynamic campaign organization, establish stronger links between the national committee and fifty state parties thus integrating the organizations, and focus on winning elections at all levels (Corrado 1996). The rationale underlying the objectives was to complement individual campaigns by providing services that were too costly or labor-intensive for candidates to do individually (Bibby 1990). According to Margolis and Green (1993), its primary focus, however, was presidential elections, as Democrats had marginal success winning the White House while continuing to do well in congressional, state and local races. Since its creation, the Coordinated Campaign has had mixed results, with the highpoint being the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections.

Why the 2004 Ohio Democratic Coordinated Campaign failed to meet the standards set by Clinton-Gore (Blumberg, Binning and Green 1999) and had more problems than Gore-Lieberman (Blumberg, Binning and Green 2003) is due to a number of factors, the most important of which relate to the value of party integration being underestimated (Trish 1994; Heldman 1996; Blumberg, Binning and Green 1999, 2003) and the inability of political parties, organized labor, and 527 committees to coordinate their efforts.

Kerry-Edwards positioned many primary campaign workers as field directors before consulting with local party chairs and without regard to their local roots, a practice that got pre-convention operations off to a rocky start and continued to cause problems in the early stages of the campaign. The problem of not understanding the local history, issues,

mindset, and leaders can create significant problems, especially when “outsiders” are unwillingly to listen to “natives” because they think they “know better.” More important, the major players—political parties, 527 committees, and organized labor—were anything but coordinated. The Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2002 prohibits them from collaborating, which resulted in valuable resources, the most important of which were volunteers, being squandered and the inability to stay on message.

Local party problems, such as scarce financial resources, scant staffs, disinterested county central committee people, and a weak volunteer base, exacerbated the problems caused by flawed internal decisions and cumbersome legal barriers.

This paper describes the 2004 Ohio Democratic Coordinated Campaign from the perspective of the Mahoning County operation. Unlike previous election years, this campaign was *uncoordinated*. Kerry-Edwards made many strategic errors prior to the official campaign, and did not recover until a month before the election. The once powerful local party, with problems of its own, was more focused on winning a high-profile local race than it was on mounting an aggressive presidential campaign. The 527 committees, especially Americans Coming Together (ACT), and labor unions organized very early and helped to compensate for the Coordinated Campaign’s shortcomings. The question is, Would Kerry be in the White House if there been greater internal and external coordination? Although the internal coordination problems could have been handled more effectively, the external coordination problems could not and cannot be resolved given the new law. Where does that leave the Democrats?

### **The Mahoning Valley: A Must Win for Democratic Statewide Candidates**

The Mahoning Valley, which includes Youngstown and Warren, is a Democratic stronghold that presidential candidates ignore at their own peril. It is not unusual for area voters to deliver majorities far above those in other urban areas and the state. In 1996, for example, Mahoning County, gave Bill Clinton nearly a 62 percent majority, which was 15 points higher than his statewide margin (Niquette 1996).<sup>1</sup> In 2000, the county gave Al Gore a 63 percent majority, albeit fewer actual votes than the total four years earlier, which bested his statewide margin by 17 points (Blumberg, Binning and Green 2003).

*Mahoning County Politics.* For four decades, from the mid-1930s until the mid-1970s, a classic party machine (Erie 1988) dominated Mahoning County politics. Campaigns and elections were a “team sport” with the party working to elect the entire candidate slate regardless of personal preferences. Vestiges of the party machine remained until 1994 when a group of young professionals, calling themselves “Democrats for Change,” waged a stunning battle to overthrow Ohio’s last party boss (Binning, Blumberg and Green 1995). They were not as interested in ridding the county of patronage and corruption as they were in electing one of the movement’s leaders to statewide office.

The old control party decided who could run for office and then depended on district leaders and precinct captains to mobilize voters. The primary goal was to win elections thereby delivering the vote to even weak candidates, such as George McGovern who nearly carried the county in the 1972 election (“County Dems to Back U, S, Ticket”

1972: 1). The party reformers, unlike the old school politicians, assumed office seekers either command or should amass the resources to run their own campaigns with the party providing services to make their campaigns more coherent (Aldrich 1995). The service model has its drawbacks because winning is secondary to supporting ideologically consistent candidates (Wilson 1962). In the case of Democrats for Change, the leadership went as far as to back opposition candidates in stealth-like campaigns (Blumberg, Binning and Green 1999). On the surface, they showed support for the party's nominees, while they made it clear to opinion and business leaders who they favored.

Similar to other service parties, the Mahoning County Democratic Party's new leadership was "in service" to select "friends" who helped them get into office. Many got their political start by phone calls made to Executive Committee members who were urged to fill vacancies on the ballot and in country government with these cronies. In this respect, the service party was no different than the control party. However, the party chair's real goal was to build an organization that would catapult his former law partner and county commissioner into statewide office.

To this end, the party chair and his former law partner, in 1996, meshed a sophisticated local party operation with an equally sophisticated Coordinated Campaign, increasing the Democratic vote in approximately 77 percent of the targeted precincts and slightly over 82 percent of the targeted ones (Blumberg, Binning and Green 1999). They were familiar faces in the Clinton White House, among Democratic National Committee operatives, and at the Ohio Democratic Party (ODP) headquarters. However, the county

commissioner's narrow reelection victory, in 1996, all but sealed his fate with the state party. Before his second term ended, he and the party chair resigned to return to their law practices and business endeavors. The party, no longer in service to anyone, lacking strong leadership, and without financial resources, floundered. An original Change supporter and township trustee assumed control of the party, but he had neither the time to devote to the daily operations nor the personal connections to the money people. The party was in service to no one and, by the 2000 presidential election, it was hollow.

The 2000 Ohio Democratic Coordinated Campaign lacked strong leadership at the state level, which led to additional problems at the county level. With little financial help from the state, no resources of its own, and a weak chair, the local party had difficulty matching the effort four years earlier. Compounding the problem, the Gore campaign pulled out of Ohio shortly before the election to concentrate its efforts in Florida. Voter turnout decreased in nearly 82 percent of all precincts (Blumberg, Binning and Green 2003), a far cry from the local party's 1996 performance. Waiting in the wings to take control of the party was the former director of operations under the Change regime. She had the backing of the former party chair and former county commissioner and support among the county central committee people with ties to Change.

The new chair faced problems similar to her most recent predecessor: She works for the county treasurer, which precludes her from devoting significant time to the party. Due, in part, to scandals that dominated local politics for the better part of two years and resulted in nearly 80 office holders and attorneys being convicted of various criminal activities, she was told not to conduct party business on county time. This had a chilling

effect on her ability to maintain regular contact with the party faithful. The precinct committee people required more attention than did the party loyalists in the machine's heyday because they were committed to the party chair rather than to the party organization. It was no surprise when many professionals who ran as a personal favor to the insurgents lost interest in the party with the first leadership switch. The party had only limited success in raising money, as the Change leadership, office holders, and moneyed supporters with deep pockets kept their checkbooks closed. Most important, political observers began to question her leadership skills when the party did not field a candidate, in 2002, to run against the Taft-appointed juvenile court judge who controlled more than 100 fiduciary jobs. The 2004 local elections, specifically the juvenile court race, were perceived by many to be a referendum on the party chair's effectiveness. When she announced the party's primary goal was to topple the popular incumbent judge, the battle lines were clear. The party was "in service" to the Democratic juvenile court candidate, while other races had lower priority.

**External Compensation for Internal Problems:  
527 Committees and Organized Labor Hit the Ground Running**

Unlike the 1992, 1996, and 2000 Coordinated Campaigns (Binning, Blumberg and Green 1995; Blumberg, Binning and Green 1999, 2003), Kerry named an outsider to run the local effort. Rick Barga, a Tiffin, Ohio native and an early supporter, was deployed to Mahoning County prior to the national convention. Having worked for Kerry in Iowa, Maryland, Washington, and Wisconsin (Skolnick 2004g), he was familiar with the campaign's grassroots strategy, the centerpiece of which was holding house parties. The day he arrived in Youngstown, he was at a serious disadvantage. The Mahoning County

Democratic Party chair was seldom in contact with him, in part, because of her full time county job. When Barga asked if she planned to have a greater presence at party headquarters after the convention, she indicated that she was not sure.

*The Hollow Party.* Barga initially relied on information, such as volunteer lists, phone bank locations, and form letters, given to him by the 1996 regional field director. Outdated information was almost as useless as the local party's "worthless" database. In late July, Barga had already gone through the precinct committee list twice, which netted only 30 volunteers. He lost two workers when they learned they would not be paid. He had not heard of "street money," which is one of the only ways to cajole many city people into do phone banking and literature drops. Lacking a solid volunteer base comprised of precinct committee people and other partisan loyalists, it was not unusual for the party to pay for outside help to perform traditional grassroots activities.

The county party met, in July, to elect officers and choose a candidate to run for an unexpected vacancy on common pleas court. The turnout was relatively low, with only 153 of the 286 precinct committee people bothering to come (Skolnick, 2004b). A few of the more vocal ones were from the ranks of those who still had allegiance to the old party boss who was overthrown a decade earlier. The political "neophytes"—those who helped orchestrate the party takeover ten years earlier—were in short supply. Their interest in the service party waned after the charismatic party chair resigned his position to pay attention to his legal practice and business interests.

Barga encouraged everyone to find others to work the precincts rather than leave them uncovered. Precinct committee people were given a half-sheet of paper with a list of



“Precinct Leader Responsibilities.” In addition to asking them to hold house parties the night of the acceptance speech, they were encouraged to go door-to-door, make phone calls, and identify Kerry voters. Everyone was supposed to recruit four or five volunteers to work Election Day doing literature drops, delivering yard signs, working at the polls, and giving voters rides. The latter two activities are the only ones actually done on Election Day. An egregious mistake was the omission of the union bug on the printed materials. The campaign was bound to get on track, or so Democrats hoped.

According to a party insider, the local party chair, Lisa Antonini, was irritated because she was not consulted before Kerry operatives named a field director, which was common practice in previous Coordinated Campaigns (Blumberg, Binning and Green, 1999, 2003). Although Barga voiced concern over not getting much assistance from the local party when he first arrived, Danny Thomas, who ran the effort four years earlier, said there was none to give. The service party lacked the same financial resources it had previously; the part-time chair was unable to give the party her undivided attention; and, many professionals who sought and won precinct committee posts as a favor to the insurgents tired of volunteering. Some party activists suggest her goal of defeating the incumbent juvenile court judge diverted attention and resources from the presidential race. The court always has been a bastion of party patronage, as there are over 100 fiduciary employees who serve at the pleasure of the judge. Although few workers lost their jobs when the Republican took office, regaining control of the seat would ward off mounting criticism about the party chair’s leadership and position her to retain control of the organization. Thomas and others cautioned her against doing it, as it

was a losing battle. A Kerry win was more important than toppling a popular and nearly unbeatable judge.

Meanwhile, Barga tried to hold the campaign together. He had numerous disagreements with the “higher ups,” including state party officials and campaign operatives based at the Columbus headquarters. They disagreed over event arrangements, like venues, and messages, such as discussing fuel efficiency in an area where the largest employer, next to the university, is General Motors. He admits that he may not have presented the case clearly, but it “was as if no one in Columbus was listening.” The Kerry campaign, in particular, ignored local concerns. This is a significant departure from the 1996 and 2000 Coordinated Campaigns when the state director and state party chair allowed phone scripts to be modified to fit local needs. They also made sure local issues, such as unfulfilled campaign pledges, were researched before candidates and surrogates visited the area (Blumberg, Binning and Green 1999, 2003). According to the former Ohio Democratic Party Chair David Leland, the greater confidence the state party had in the county party chair, the more latitude he or she was given to make these type decisions (Blumberg, Binning and Green 1999).

Barga grew increasingly frustrated at the decision making structure. In early June, a pre-convention attempt to “sell” Kerry, or at least build enthusiasm for the ticket, got off to a rocky start when Teresa Heinz Kerry met with small group of area military wives, including state Representative John Bocchieri’s wife and three other relatives, at a suburban library. The ODP leadership is confident that Bocchieri has what it takes to win higher office, so this was a good opportunity to showcase his family. After the brief

“closed” event, Heinz Kerry met with locked-out workers at RMI Titanium Company, and then went to a private event with another small number of local supporters (Skolnick 2004a). Many party loyalists and area voters hoped to meet her, but were denied access to the three events.

In late August, John Edwards made a campaign stop in Warren instead of taking Barga’s suggestion to hold a rally in Youngstown. Even the former local party chair made calls to Columbus campaign headquarters in an attempt to get the location changed to the Southern Park Mall, which could accommodate a large crowd, but no one would listen. Edwards rallied a group of approximately 4,000 at the Warren Community Amphitheater, which is a relatively low turnout for Valley voters (Skolnick 2004c). According to an insider, Edwards advance people refused to work with Barga, which may be part of the reason the event was held in the adjacent county. The rally, regardless of who was in charge, was planned poorly. Youngstown Clerk of Courts Sarah Brown Clark and County Prosecutor Paul Gains, who gained national prominence after surviving a mob hit, were not invited to join other Democratic elected officials on stage. Neither depended on the Mahoning County Democratic Party to get elected, which means they are often not invited to these events. Gains quipped that he is not on the “A List.” People were sweltering, some having to be carried out on stretchers, as they waited for Edwards who was four hours behind schedule. The local parties did not think to check the weather forecast or to provide enough water for the crowd. According to David Skolnick, *The Vindicator* political reporter, “most of the special events and campaign, itself, were anything but coordinated.”

Skolnick said the media were rarely given much advanced notice of candidates and surrogates' visits to the area, so he relied on Thomas, who was brought on board late in the campaign, and County Commissioner Ed Reese, a member of the campaign's national finance committee, for information, which he then verified with the state operation. There was no specific itinerary, with events seemingly planned on the spur of the moment. Skolnick was surprised by the ineptness: The staff did not have a handle on details, such as the capacity of halls, potential parking problems, and, most important, the history of the area. For example, Kerry visited the old Sheet & Tube facility during the primary to imply Ohio's economy was collapsing under Bush policies. The problem of choosing the location was the mill closed its Youngstown operation during the Carter administration. The people on the ground were not from nor ever lived in the Mahoning Valley and, for whatever reason, the local party leadership did not fill the information void.

Joe Grandmaison who, at the time, was on the Export-Import Bank Board of Directors and came to Youngstown to work on the campaign, echoed Barga's complaints and Skolnick's observations: "I have been in a lot of campaigns, and I can't even discuss the Ohio operation without getting frustrated." According to Grandmaison, it was as bad of an operation as he has even seen. The national office basically gave the state operation to someone as a "concession," and never questioned his decisions. Whenever a question would arise, the national campaign replied, "Poersch is in charge."<sup>2</sup> Decision making was centralized, with party integration almost nil. The Kerry people, operating from the ODP headquarters in Columbus, were "impossible" when it came to coordinating road trips for

surrogates. The local party had no influence over who would visit the area. In fact, most luminaries who came to Youngstown had no connection to the campaign, itself; rather, they came at the request of other organizations.

Barga was stripped of his Trumbull County duties just a month after being named to run the Mahoning and Trumbull operations. A month before the November election, he was fired as the Mahoning County field director. The local party had no warning of his ouster and the Ohio Democratic Coordinated Campaign chose to not comment. Antonini was told, “Kerry-Edwards campaign officials were uncomfortable with Barga’s management style, among other issues” (Skolnick 2004g: B3). Antonini and Barga finally came to a meeting of the minds, and she put him on the party payroll so he could help coordinate local races.

*Single-directed 527 Committees.* Although anti-Bush political activists and donors were initially uncertain the president could be defeated, they were sure if the race became competitive that Ohio voters would play a central role in his demise. Hindsight suggested the Gore campaign made a strategic error by writing off Ohio less than month before the election, as he lost the state by only 3 percentage points. Ohio looked ripe for the Democrats, in 2004, in large measure because of its weakening industrial economy. However, many insiders expressed serious doubt about the ODP’s ability to run a winning statewide campaign given the Gore loss and the Republican hold on all statewide offices. Since George Voinovich’s 1990 gubernatorial victory—with the exception of John Glenn’s 1992 reelection win—the Ohio Republican Party has gained almost total

control of state government, as well as a majority of the congressional delegation and the two U. S. Senate seats.

The national anti-Bush activist and donors who put together Americans Coming Together (ACT) were going to be prepared if the race became competitive. A loophole in the new campaign finance law provided an opportunity for it to establish a 527 committee that would focus on registering and mobilizing voters, campaign activities that had once been the domain of state and local parties. The ODP and local parties were hollow, which meant ACT could play a prominent role in defeating Bush.

Ohio ACT worked quietly at building a political infrastructure and registering voters in highly Democratic areas. ACT recruited Bill Padisak, Executive Vice President of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), to run its Mahoning Valley operation. On leave from the SEIU, he could not coordinate the committee's activities with unions, the ODP, and Coordinated Campaign because of federal regulations governing the alliances. This inevitably resulted in duplication.

Padisak supervised and trained 60 canvassers, many of whom were Youngstown State University students. They were provided with palm pilots, walking lists, and scripts and given instructions to register likely Democratic voters. They walked the precincts, mostly in low-income areas in the city, in late afternoon and early evening, and on weekends. Padisak said ACT registered approximately 10,000 voters in Mahoning County. According to one ACT volunteer who worked in another state, canvassers were instructed to engage a potential voter in a conversation and, if it appeared he or she

planned to vote for someone other than the Democratic nominee, the volunteer was supposed to continue to the next residence without offering to register the person.

It appeared as though all voting age area residents were registered at least once, if not more. According to Mahoning County Board of Elections records there were 195,092 registered voters, but census data indicate there are only 186,928 people over 18 years of age who live in the county. The local election official offered a variety of explanations for this discrepancy, including people not having been purged from the rolls (Skolnick 2004h). Whatever the reason, ACT, along with unions and parties, did the job.

*Organized Labor's Take Back Ohio.* The Ohio AFL-CIO divided the state into ten zones, each one headed by a coordinator. Debbie Bindas, an arbitrator for AFSCME Ohio Council 8, was released from her work responsibilities to run organized labors' effort in area that included four counties: Ashtabula, Columbiana, Mahoning, and Trumbull.<sup>3</sup> She was the linchpin in what organized labor considered to be among the most critical regions in the state.

Bindas was appointed Zone 1 Coordinator the third week in February, and told to pack her things because she was moving to AFL-CIO office. By the first week in March, the operation was high gear. Initially, there were three people administering the local operation, two full-time and one part-time. The staff increased to ten by July and reached its full complement a month before the election: Among the 35 "troops" from 11 states were people representing almost all areas of labor including, among others, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), American Labor Council (ALC), American Nurses Association (ANA), International Union of Electronic,

Electrical, Salaried, Machine and Furniture Workers-Communications Workers of American (IUE-CWA), Postal Workers, Steelworkers, and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW).

As soon as Bindas was put in charge, she had to update the somewhat outdated union leadership list, which necessitated contacting the 497 locals. Knowing the unions are extremely sensitive to the chain of command, she did not want to alienate anyone needlessly. The “war room” walls were covered with charts that listed the each leader’s name with a notation indicating if the local was active or inactive. Once Bindas had the information, she had to make sure every local had a coordinator. Each union was part of a Member Action Team or Rapid Action Network (the title depended on the union.) Her staff had to educate union members before the negative media blitz started. The idea was to “inoculate” them from any charges leveled against Kerry by the opposition. As important, she had to change the union “culture” because the campaign was “breaking new ground.” For example, the traditional literature drops where volunteers hung candidate information on doors were a thing of the past. Volunteers were mandated to do one-on-one contacts with *all* AFL-CIO affiliated members. *Every* union member was on a home visit list: If the volunteer did not find the member at home, he or she was contacted at work within 24 hours of the attempt.

According to Bindas, the union moved into the “hi-tech” age. She had bar coded lists with every union member’s name and address, and was given a scanner to enter the information as it was collected. When the volunteer found someone at home, he or she asked the union member to identify the one issue most important to him or her. The



response was recorded; the sheet was scanned; and, the union member was sent literature from the Washington office. The war on terrorism was not on the list, although it was mentioned repeatedly by members, most of whom were critical the Bush administration's policy. There was a write-in box on the form, which meant the issue was noted. The volunteer also was required to code the number of people in the household (e.g., spouse and children). This was one way to check whether the volunteer reported an actual contact or was inflating the data. In essence, the volunteers had "their feet held to the fire," that is, they were accountable. The volunteers registered and re-registered every person because the unions did not want to chance that some was not registered properly, such as not having changed their address at the board of elections.

All volunteers received training to learn how to become "communicators." Many never had to be concerned about this in their jobs, but now they were put into situations where they had to listen to people and sell the Kerry-Edwards ticket. Bindas and her staff did role-playing with the volunteers to ready them for the work in the field. The AFL-CIO left nothing to chance in this high-stakes campaign, and hired campaign consultants to map the strategy, which was incorporated in "The 10 Point Program" to "Take Back Ohio," as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Take Back Ohio 10 Point Program**

- 1. Recruit a key contact at each local and worksite**
  - Commit to program
  - Attend regular planning meeting
  - Available by e-mail or fax
  - Plug into communication web
  
- 2. Distribute leaflets at all union worksites**
  - Leaflet at least once a month, increasing in Fall 2004

**Figure 1: Take Back Ohio 10 Point Program** (continued)

- 3. Maximize contact through union publications**
  - Include Labor 2004 information in every issue
  - Publish leaflets
  - Report on issue agenda
  - Report on votes
  - Report on support for organizing
- 4. Utilize regular meetings from local presidents and business agents**
  - Include current leaflets and issue materials in all local union mailings
  - Use targeted mail in 2004
  - Make three calls to targeted members in 2004
  
  - Receive quality list with phone numbers, e-mail, registration and change of address
- 5. Maximize impact of union phone calls**
  - Include current messages in all calls
  - Make three calls to targeted members in 2004
- 6. Update local membership lists**
  - Work with the state federation or international union
  - Receive quality list with phone numbers, e-mail, registration and changes of address
- 7. Increase registration by 10 percent**
- 8. Conduct massive GOTV for primaries and Election Day (Nov. 2, 2004)**
- 9. Build rapid response network in the work place**
  - Recruit activists for issue mobilization
  - Generate letters, calls and e-mails to elected officials
  - Meet with elected officials
- 10. Link politics to organizing**
  - Schedule regular meetings to educate elected officials
  - Identify opportunities for elected officials to help organizing
  - Integrate support for organizing into candidate

Source: "Take Back Ohio Labor 2004" News.

### **The [Un]coordinated Campaign Regroups: Some Party Problems Get Resolved**

Jim DeMay, the Ohio Director of the Coordinated Campaign, in 1996, was deployed to Columbus headquarters, in early October, to help salvage the Kerry-Edwards campaign. Thomas, an assistant field director, in 1996, and field director, in 2000, called him immediately, sounding the alarm about the deteriorating situation. DeMay responded, telling Thomas he was getting ready to contact him about running the local party's get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort. Within one week's time, the Coordinated Campaign was being resuscitated (or so it was hoped).

Nancy Richardson, Michael Dukakis's education adviser during his second term as governor and a seasoned campaigner, was sent to work at the Mahoning County Democratic Party Headquarters. Richardson, a former Youngstown resident, visited the area during the summer and heard "rumblings" about the local campaign's problems. She called the Massachusetts Democratic Party, Michael Dukakis, the DNC, the Columbus person in charge of volunteers, and the Kerry Travelers, offering to help on the campaign. She began as a Kerry Traveler—Kerry Travelers were volunteers who were shuttled to swing states to work on the grassroots campaign—and ended by structuring the downtown operation.

Thomas and Richardson drove to Columbus to pick up Cheryl Losser, who came from the DNC to run the get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort from a second office in the suburbs. Richardson handled certain logistics, such as booking hotel rooms for the candidates and their staff, finding accommodations for volunteers, and making sure everyone was fed. Losser handled other logistics, such as making sure funds were available and plotting the

final suburban and outer county canvassing. According to Richardson, the county had limited resources until the Kerry campaign was certain it had to target Ohio.

*The Layer-Cake Party Campaign.* Richardson suggests the Coordinated Campaign during the last month can best be viewed as “one with multiple power and management centers.” Losser, the “titular director of the GOTV operation,” was at the suburban Boardman office, but only really controlled the non-African American precincts. Richardson was in charge of the downtown office, which handled voter protection, phone banking, African American canvassing, as well as other Election Day activities. *The Buckeye Review*, the locally owned African American newspaper, housed one of two African American outreach groups that also did phone banking and canvassing in the Youngstown’s minority precincts. Antonini and Barga added another layer, helping to coordinate the precincts from downtown. Richardson likened it to an “Internet start-up with teams assuming roles that were needed at the time, creative ideas bubbling up, [and] no particular hierarchy in the end, but everyone working toward one goal.”

*Finding, Keeping, and Coordinating Volunteers.* The largest resource problem, according to Richardson, was the lack of local volunteers, especially as the 527s siphoned whatever ones there were from the party base: “The 527s and unions were sucking oxygen from the party.” The new law created a paradoxical situation: The external campaign was hurting the party by siphoning volunteers needed for the ground game, but the 527 committees and labor unions were better organized from the start and single-focused on winning the White House. However, it is unclear whether a change in the law that prohibits coordinating their campaign activities would actually help the party, as

labor unions have always done their own GOTV, including literature drops and phone banking. In any case, she found it extremely difficult to “energize people in a dying area.” Richardson said it was not until late in the campaign that the entire field operation came together.

Richardson, a graduate of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, said Barga’s problems were cumulative. Elaine and Peter Simon, two freelancers who came from Colorado to help with the campaign, tried to construct a volunteer list from one that was virtually nonexistent. The precincts were in disarray, which seemed to mirror the state operation. As important, the volunteers who remained did not want to work at the downtown office and people, in general, did not want to visit party headquarters, which was difficult to access from the street due to roadwork. The phone bank was at a downtown law firm, which also depressed the number of people who were willing to work throughout the campaign. An intern who was put in charge of staffing the phones during the early part of the campaign indicated that she was having difficulty getting even two people a night to make calls.<sup>4</sup> The phone bank operation did not get on track until Grandmaison brought a group of “friends” to Youngstown.

Grandmaison came to Ohio with a dozen friends nine days prior to the election. He had been working four to five hours per day as a volunteer in the Washington office handling VIP problems. Alice Germond, the DNC Secretary, was the coordinator of “Road Trip to Victory,” so was familiar with the field problems. One observer suggests Kerry elites did not trust “outsiders” to run the campaign so placed New Englanders in battleground states. In either case, Grandmaison, after consulting with Germond, put

together a group of seasoned campaigners, which included at least two ambassadors. Most wanted to work in Pennsylvania, as it is close to Washington; however, Pennsylvania was in the “blue state” column and had enough volunteers. The next choice was West Virginia, but it had been written off as a “red state.” Grandmaison knew Losser from a previous campaign, so brought the contingent to Youngstown when she said help was needed. Among his friends was a radio personality who he met during the Gore campaign. She and two others took control of the phone bank, raising the output from 1,000 to 10,000 calls per day as the election neared. Grandmaison said she is good at making everyone “feel like part of the whole” and knows how to blend experienced older people with energetic younger people. There were at least a dozen people working the phones most nights, including Kerry Travelers and Kerry Washington staffers, and over one hundred the final days of the campaign.

However, there were continuing “personnel problems” at the three offices. Barga, an early Kerry supporter without local roots, was put in charge of the campaign and given no resources and then fired when criticism started to erupt. There were “volatile” people working with him who made “the core unstable.” Richardson was able to calm the turbulence” but new problems arose regularly. In addition to the tension between the local party chair and state staff, Losser angered many volunteers who were unwilling to deal with her take-charge personality. According to Richardson, “Joe [Grandmaison] was a master at smoothing ruffled feathers,” so many of the unhappy volunteers migrated back downtown.

In retrospect, Richardson said the “the two offices [downtown and Boardman] may have saved the campaign.” The “personalities” had a difficult time co-existing, so it was probably best to separate them. “They had a place to go and work.”

*Voter Outreach.* There was a parallel African American outreach effort that many insiders said was, at best, confusing and, at worst, inefficient. State Representative Sylvester Patton, Jr. was in charge of the local Ohio Legislative Black Caucus (OLBC) operation that was headquartered at *The Buckeye Review*. He had two paid staff, at least one of whom was “inexperienced running something of this magnitude.” Richardson said he did “an adequate job” [given] that he was “under enormous pressure.” Tony Robinson, who coordinated the minority GOTV from his office in Washington, sent A. Robert Brown to Youngstown to oversee the DNC’s own African American outreach program. According to Thomas, it was a like a comedy, with Patton going out the back door of campaign headquarters and Brown coming in the front door. On one occasion, Patton went to Cleveland to pick up GOTV piece, getting there ahead of Brown. When Brown returned empty handed, he blamed the local party.

The outreach programs failed to measure up to those instituted during the 1996 Coordinated Campaign (Blumberg, Binning and Green 1999) and were less organized than the ones in 2000 (Blumberg, Binning and Green 2003). African American outreach topped the list, in 2004, but well-developed programs for Hispanics, women, and gays and lesbians were missing. The latter group was an important element of the delegate selection process, but the focus appeared to shift during the campaign. One possible explanation could be the divisive gay marriage amendment, which was on the Ohio

ballot. Given Kerry's need to defend his military record and flip-flopping on issues, it seems reasonable to assume the campaign tried to avoid bringing attention to another controversial issue due to the closeness of the race in a battleground state.

*Kerry Surrogates and Freelance Luminaries.* According to Grandmaison, the Coordinated Campaign was “impossible” when it came to arranging road trips for surrogates. The Columbus staff made all decisions regarding who would visit the Mahoning Valley, and only sent a small number of speakers to the area. The local party, OLBC, 527s, and unions sponsored most of the speakers. The Coordinated Campaign sent Jim Rassman, who credits Kerry with saving his life when they served in Vietnam (Skolnick 2004d), and Retired Army General Wesley Clark (“Clark to Speak at YSU” 2004) to Youngstown. Former Senator Max Cleland came for a party dinner (“Dems Plan Dinner” 2004); Michael Moore spoke at a Youngstown State University GOTV rally as part of his “Slacker Uprising Tour” (n.a. 2004); Rev. Al Sharpton and hip-hop singer Foxy Brown spoke to a group of minority pastors on behalf of Clergy for Kerry (“Sharpton Stumps with Black Clergy for Kerry 2004”); and, Jesse Jackson, as personal favor to a local African American minister, came to an area church for the “Lift Every Voice & Vote “Get-out-the-Vote Rally” (“Bush Cabinet Members Visit the Valley to Win Black Votes” 2004).

Bring Ohio Back, an Ohio-based 527 committee, focused on educating state voters about the impact of Bush administration policies on their lives, put together a group of entertainers who toured the state. Among those on the Boardman stop were Chad Lowe, Julianna Margulies, Kyra Sedgwick, Hilary Swank, and Marisa Tomei (Barron 2004).



The external groups—527 committees, labor unions, and freelancers—compensated for the Coordinated Campaign’s inattention to the Democratic stronghold by arranging their own campaign visits by high-profile supporters.

*Kerry and Edwards Campaign in the Mahoning Valley.* The Coordinated Campaign had not learned a lesson from Teresa Heinz Kerry’s pre-convention visit to the area, and scheduled Elizabeth Edwards to speak to approximately 40 people at another closed event in late September (Skolnick 2004e), once again leaving area voters with the impression the candidates’ wives were arrogant. Voters rarely blame political parties and advance teams for decisions regarding the venue and accessibility. The problems did not end there.

In early October, coinciding with Barga’s firing, Kerry held a town hall meeting at Austintown Fitch High School, which is located in a suburb heavily populated with GM Lordstown workers. The crowd, estimated at 800 (Skolnick 2004f), fell far short of what was needed to energize voters. The Mahoning County Democratic Party distributed the tickets, but forgot to provide labor with the 100 tickets it was promised. Some politicos suggest labor was behind Barga’s ouster. Once again, neither Brown Clark nor Gains were invited to the Kerry event, which means the first instance was not an oversight. Brown Clark is the most popular African American office holder in the city and has a support base that includes Youngstown State University faculty, administrators, and staff (she is on leave from her faculty position there). As interesting, Brown Clark’s court administrator and party vice chair, Michelle Clarett, also was snubbed.

Slightly more than two weeks after the town hall meeting, Kerry returned to the area for a hunting trip in an attempt to appeal to National Rifle Association members. The idea was ill conceived from the start, and the fiasco was played out in the media (Skolnick 2004i). According to Skolnick, it was “the single worst and most uncoordinated [campaign] event” he ever witnessed. President Bush’s regional press person requested his permission to redistribute the article about the outing, saying it was “the most hysterical thing he had ever read.”

### **The Final Push**

The last three weeks of the campaign were devoted to turning out the base. Columbus sent the Boardman office a list of swing voters, which Thomas and Losser reworked. Priority 1 precincts had a low turnout and high Democratic Performance Index (DPI); Priority 2 precincts had 65 percent turnout and high DPI; and, Priority 3 precincts had 75 percent turnout and high DPI. Unlike 1996 (Blumberg, Binning and Green 1999), the party did not work all precincts. The last piece of literature did not have Kerry’s name on it. Thomas said it was anyone’s guess why it was omitted, but they complained so loudly that the Coordinated Campaign paid for another piece.

One week prior to the election, busloads of volunteers—Kerry Travelers—came to canvass precincts. One bus was from Washington, D. C. and another was from Buffalo, New York. More volunteers arrived in private cars. As states were put into either the “sure” or written off” column, volunteers were deployed wherever needed. Volunteers went door-to-door, “knocking and talking,” rather than doing the traditional literature

drops. Some of the early volunteers, according to Thomas, were unable to cope with the frenzy, so resorted to doing whatever they could when they could.

On October 31, Kerry spoke to an estimated 20,000 people packed into Warren's Courthouse Square. Joining him at the nighttime rally were former Senator John Glenn, Congressmen Tim Ryan and Ted Strickland, Retired Admiral William Crowe, and singer Bon Jovi (Skolnick 2004j). This was the proverbial shot in the arm the campaign needed, although Warren was chosen over Youngstown for the event.

Elected officials came from as far as California to help return Ohio to red state status. State Assemblyman Joe Nation arrived from California with three staff members. Congressman John Oliver from Massachusetts came with approximately six staffers and Congressman Joe Serrano from New York sent two people, including his chief of staff. An assistant secretary of Agriculture from the Clinton administration also made his way to Youngstown. Congressman Ted Strickland's aide, Chad Tanner, was put in charge of press relations. During the final week of the campaign, Columbus sent some its best field operatives to trouble spots to oversee the operations: A few were deployed to the Boardman office.

The Coordinated Campaign prepared for any eventuality that could happen on Election Day. Almost 200 people were trained the night before the election to watch for voting irregularities. On Tuesday, there were 125 volunteers at the Steelworkers Union Hall in Struthers, an old mill town, who went on blind foot pulls in Priority 2 precincts.

Some preparations were "overkill." Grandmaison was contacted by "some kid in Columbus" who said he would be calling the office every 30 minutes to find how many

people were given rides to the polls and if there were any problems. Grandmaison told him, “I will give you the numbers now because I’m going to lie to your anyway.” He explained that young people have much to offer, but they lack experience: “They just do it by the numbers.” He continued: “They don’t understand. There’s no reasonableness. There’s no judgment. It’s like they are in charge of the German army.” Nonetheless, the Coordinated Campaign pulled it together a few weeks before the election.

*ACT’s Ground War.* ACT’s new challenge was to mobilize voters, especially in precincts where it registered large numbers of people. One prong of its strategy was to identify voters who wanted to cast absentee ballots. For the most part, ACT workers contacted senior citizens; had them complete absentee ballot requests; and, returned the form to the Board of Elections. Padisak estimated that ACT turned in 4,000 absentee applications.

The second phase was the GOTV effort. Canvassers were sent into neighborhoods where “progressive” and “interested” voters lived. (Twenty thousand potential voters had been identified through phone banking.) Each team, which consisted of six canvassers and a supervisor, made three passes: a post-it note was put on the door, then a door hanger was put on the knob, and, finally, a canvasser knocked on the door. If ACT canvassers crossed paths with party and union canvassers, they moved to another area to avoid giving the false impression the organizations were coordinating their efforts. Padisak was originally told to hire 600 canvassers for Election Day. When it became clear Ohio was a toss-up, he was told to double his efforts and hire 1,250 workers. He rented 250 vans to transport the canvassers, not give rides to the polls as parties do. Once

again, the committee focused its efforts on the areas with high concentrations of likely Kerry supporters. ACT's Mahoning County Election Day payroll was \$175,000.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, questions were raised about the ability of 527s to get out the vote. According to a local canvass manger, the strategy was wanting. He said too many resources were spent in the "base area" registering city voters when more attention should have been paid to "persuasion areas" convincing suburban voters to support Kerry. He also questioned ACT's hiring practices: "It seemed like the campaign was just hiring warm bodies rather than take [*sic*] the time and hire quality, educated, canvassers. Most of the canvassers were only interested in the money" rather than helping elect a president. Nonetheless, ACT was organized early and remained focused during the entire campaign.

*Organized Labor Delivers.* The unions did phone banking immediately prior to the election, concentrating on undecideds. The last two days of the campaign, labor volunteers who were "off the clock," fanned out across the area. On Election Day, the AFL-CIO's own Voter Protection Program flew in attorneys from other states, mostly positioning them in heavily Democratic counties.

Most observers, including some party insiders, political reporters, and political pundits, suggest that Kerry's Ohio numbers would have been much lower if it was not for organized labor's effort. According to Bindas, the local party was "ineffective" at performing "traditional" party activities, in part, because it had "no army." Party activists willing to devote time to the campaign were in short supply. The 527 committees and labor unions shouldered much of the responsibility throughout the entire campaign,

including GOTV. On Election Day, Kerry freelancers and Kerry Travelers compensated for the low number of precinct committee people and local party volunteers working on GOTV.

Organized labor's numbers are impressive. The "AFL-CIO Post-Election Survey" conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates (2004) indicates that 67 percent of Ohio union members voted for Kerry as compared to four years earlier when 62 percent voted for Gore. Labor accounted for 39 percent of Kerry's Ohio vote total, which was a 5 percent increase or 250,000 more votes than Gore received in 2000. Statewide, 728 full-time release staff worked on the presidential campaign and there were 36,078 volunteers as of mid-October. There were 6,224,500 pieces of worksite literature ordered; 3,808,729 pieces of mail sent to union households; and, 4,182,115 calls made to union members. Organized labor outdid itself.

*The Results.* Kerry won Mahoning County with almost 63 percent of the two-party vote as compared to 49 percent statewide and his raw numbers surpassed Gore's by 13,000 votes. Much controversy remains about the Ohio election results, although there is no substantive proof the election was "stolen." Grandmaison places much of the blame for Kerry's loss on Democratic counties where a single voting machine was placed in some wards and many were not programmed to record votes accurately. According to Grandmaison, Kerry's defeat can be attributed to the Democrats' ineptness, rather than Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell's shenanigans. A Voting Rights Institute (Democratic National Committee Voting Rights Institute 2005) report confirms his

thoughts: “The statistical study of precinct-level data does not suggest the occurrence of widespread fraud that systematically misallocated votes from Kerry to Bush” (10).

### **Conclusion**

The Coordinated Campaign got off to an inauspicious start in Mahoning County, as the Kerry campaign named a field director without consulting the local party chair. This caused unnecessary friction between the campaign and party and resulted in valuable time being lost. Compounding the problem, the party was unable to count on its precinct committee people to provide a base for grassroots activities. There was a general lack of enthusiasm, as evidenced by the trouble Barga had in getting people to hold house parties, phone bank, and recruit volunteers. Convincing precinct committee people to engage in the ground game is never easy and neither is building a volunteer base. The former party chair ran an inclusive party, at least on the surface, by holding regular meetings with city wards and outlying districts, instituting policy committees, publishing frequent newsletters, and sending personal letters and making phone calls to precinct committee people and executive committee members (Blumberg, Binning and Green 2003). Thus, when it came time to mobilize the base, it was relatively easy. The Change party’s second incarnation was barely able to muster a quorum at the meeting to select a candidate to run against a Taft-appointed judge in the common pleas court general division. The 527 committees, by paying canvassers, caused the hollow party more problems as it siphoned potential supplemental workers from it.

The general lack of party integration at all levels created additional problems. The local party chair was blindsided when the Kerry campaign fired the field director thereby

driving a further wedge between the state and local operations. Consultations on the candidates and surrogates' area visits were wanting, as at least three events were not the type that play well in the Mahoning Valley: Teresa Heinz Kerry and Elizabeth Edwards's campaign stops were closed events, which gave supporters the impression both wives were unwilling to meet with average voters. John Kerry's town meeting was held inside a suburban high school, which meant there was a limit to the number of people who could attend. Moreover, labor unions were left standing in the cold, as they did not receive the 100 tickets promised by the party. The crowing event, John Kerry's campaign rally just days before the election, was held in Trumbull County. This would not have happened under the original Change regime.

A part of Kerry's Ohio loss can be attributed to the disarray within the Ohio Democratic Party. There is some indication that many local parties have problems similar to the ODP's, such as the lack of a solid financial base and a weak organizational structure, but there is mounting concern of the party's inability to win a statewide partisan race in five election cycles.<sup>6</sup> Some observers also suggest Kerry was a poor candidate for Ohio, which is supported by an internal labor poll that found Democrats would have carried the state with Edwards at the top of the ticket. Kerry was unable to keep his campaign centered on the economic issues that beleaguered Ohio and, for all intents and purposes, quieted Edwards on the "two Americas." He spent much time defending his military record, Senate attendance record, and issue flip-flops.

Meanwhile, the unexpected happened: Bush increased his county total by more than 7,900 votes (Mahoning County Board of Elections 2000, 2004) and state total by over



509,400 votes (*Almanac of American Politics* 2006: 1300). Republicans recognized the need for a stronger ground game than the one that was waged four years earlier, so they developed a sophisticated grassroots organization that was closely coordinated with the rest of the campaign. They were able to mobilize their key constituents, including Christian Conservatives (helped by the same-sex marriage amendment on the Ohio ballot).

Resources and teamwork win close elections. The Democrats had ample resources available, in 2004, but the Kerry effort fell short because there was no teamwork. Although the local party in this Democratic stronghold is hollow, its problems were exacerbated as many potential volunteers worked under the ACT umbrella as canvassers. None of ACT's resources could be integrated with those of the local party or the Kerry campaign due to the new campaign finance laws. This left the 527 committees and labor unions to behave as free agents, with efforts such as voter registration and GOTV being duplicated thus wasting resources and, as important, not being able to stay on message.

There is little, if any, doubt that ACT and the AFL-CIO made better use of their resources than did the Coordinated Campaign. ACT was especially good at registering voters and had some success, although it was not as effective as originally predicted, in GOTV. Unions have always worked as free agents, as they run their own phone banks and do their own GOTV. In 2004, the AFL-CIO waged an all out assault marked by an impressive grassroots effort supplemented by direct mail. Labor was well resourced, well organized, and experienced in terms of campaign mechanics.

The overarching problem was the lack of coordination among the parties at all levels, the 527 committees, and labor unions. Where one was weak, the other could compensate had the law been different. The task of winning elections is made more difficult with a party of strangers.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The figures are based on a two-party vote. Youngstown, Ohio is located in Mahoning County and Warren, Ohio is located in Trumbull County.

<sup>2</sup>John Poersch also served as the state director for the 2000 Ohio Democratic Coordinated Campaign.

<sup>3</sup>Debbie Bindas also holds a seat on the Central Labor Council and is a Democratic state central committeewoman.

<sup>4</sup>The local campaign managed to avoid getting in trouble over two violations, one of which related to the phone script. Volunteers were identifying themselves as making calls on behalf of "Kerry-Edwards." Barga was unaware of the federal regulation that prohibits the use of a presidential candidate's name, but soon after the problem was brought to his attention, "Victory 2004" was used.

<sup>5</sup>Since the Fall 2003, it spent \$1.1 million in Ohio, hired 700 staff, and registered 67,000 new voters (Naymik 2004).

<sup>6</sup>Democratic candidates have won State Supreme Court contests. There are partisan primary elections and nonpartisan general elections.

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