

PROTECTING THE VOTE IN HEARTLAND USA: **A BRIEF TOUR OF OUR DEMOCRATIC CAMPAIGN EFFORTS IN** **CHICAGO , WISCONSIN, MICHIGAN AND OHIO**

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Chicago

In the Hyde Park Section of Chicago two neighborhoods meet, the heady one of University of Chicago's graduate students in Politics and Economics who often contribute to the tone and the direction of the Nation's political discourse and the down home one of working class folk. Both students and neighborhood folk frequent the Valois Cafeteria. We visited it to see what the spirit was like in the place where President Obama is said to like to catch breakfast when he's home in Chicago.



The Valois has an Obama poster in the window next to the entry door. Inside were friendly people serving the lunch. We had a late breakfast including pancakes advertised as Obama's favorites recommended by the menu signs and the head server. Patrons sit awhile at tables as though a casual discussion is part of the fare.

Afterwards, we take the "EL" back to downtown Chicago near the Loop and find the tall, block long Prudential Building where City transportation feeds into the ground floor. Facing Grant Park, where Obama held his 2008 election night victory rally, the building is formidable and bustling. Guards are everywhere and entry to the headquarters office is by invitation only. Even so a campaign official gives us a number we can call to ask questions and

offer comments that will be transmitted in to the headquarters campaign.

That number is: (310)756-3355. I use it before the second debate.

Wisconsin

We leave Chicago on the train for our next stop, Milwaukee and then by car on to quintessential small town Wisconsin, Sheboygan. The air is brisk, the leaves are littering the streets. Sheboygan is a place where there is one good sandwich shop in town, although not one you'd write home about, and Democratic Headquarters for the County which is bright and cheery. Jack Henderson is the Regional Director, and the staff is just

beginning to get feedback on the voting process. Jack has legal back up for any hijinks in the coming weeks.

The Office Manager is aware that there is a Congressional seat in Southern California in the San Fernando Valley where two Democrats are running in the general election, Brad Sherman and Howard Berman, but doesn't know we have a similar situation in our 15th Congressional District.

One staff member recalls her recent stay in Poway, California where she slipped an Obama button into her sister-in-law's coat pocket only to get an email later vowing to throw it in the trash.

From there we travel up to the Peninsula recreation area at Sturgeon Bay, noticing along the way a battle of signs. There is a pattern, Romney signs predominate on the inland side of the highway where the farmlands extend, and Obama signs predominate on the shoreline side where the fishing and vacation cabins are located. There is a similar battle going on between Tammy Baldwin and Tommy Thompson roadside displays.

Wisconsin's Voting Act allows for seven different forms of voter i.d. to be produced at the polling place or an affidavit if one has a sincerely held religious belief that prohibits photography of self; otherwise the voter gets a provisional ballot and must provide photo ID later.

Dane County Circuit Court Judge David Flanagan has already issued an injunction to prevent the new Wisconsin Act 23 from going into effect. It would have changed the requirements so that voter photo ID would have to be provided on election day to vote a regular ballot. Even though the injunction is still in effect, signs are still on busses telling people to bring their photo ID if they want to vote.

Michigan

After leaving the Upper Peninsula and crossing down to lower Michigan via the Mackinac Bridge that divides Lake Huron from Lake Michigan, we head down to the town of Gaylord in hunting country of Michigan.

We had watched the first debate and next day I ask a young man at the desk of our motel his reaction. He tells me he thinks Romney had it nailed and Obama was both flip-floppy and kept repeating the same thing and over which strikes me as contradictory observations. I do concede that Obama was too restrained and not up to par and say "we'll see".

We push on for the State Party Democratic headquarters in Lansing, Michigan. It's located in a large Victorian house. There the campaign Communications Director Kirstin Alvanitakis tells me that voter photo ID is not required at the polling place, but if not provided, the voter must fill out and sign an affidavit to vote a regular ballot. She says

that the campaign's concern is that poll workers need training to enforce this correctly so that no one is relegated unnecessarily to a provisional ballot.

She tells me the State Party Chair, Mark Brewer, released a press statement to the Detroit News and Detroit Free Press calling out Secretary of State Ruth Johnson for failing to train her election officials to allow voters to sign an affidavit if they don't have photo ID with them and for failing to get ballots out to military voters in sufficient time. He believes that a citizenship checkbox put on the ballot will cause mass voter confusion. Kirstin prints out a copy of the news release for me.

One other concern that Michigan folk have is that the driver's license address must match the registration address to vote so students must re-register at their college campus address. The office is pushing to meet their deadline the following Tuesday to have all the new registrations in to the Registrar.

This requirement is on my mind as we pull into the Ann Arbor Obama Campaign for Change Headquarters in a small courtyard amid funky shops where Randy Frank is Manager. He tells me the campaign will have people observing at every voting place and a legal team available on Election Day. They are telling students to re-register at their campus location or vote absentee.

On another issue, he mentions that there is a court hearing in progress in Flint that day on whether ballots will only be counted if the voter checks a box on the ballot next to a statement that the voter is a citizen. Plaintiffs asking the court to strike this down include SEIU, ACLU and Rainbow Push. I follow up on this later and find out that federal judge Paul Bower sees the checkbox as an infringement on voter rights (voters already affirm their citizenship when registering) and issues a preliminary injunction against requiring voters to check the box.

Ohio

We move on to Ohio, down through Toledo on a quiet Sunday and across the State to the outskirts of Cleveland where billboards (believed to be paid for by Republican "dark" money) in black areas warn citizens that voting fraud is a felony. I spot one of them. Thirty minutes later we are in Akron, Ohio where the Democratic Campaign Headquarters for Summit County is housed in a low lying modern office building on Grant Street. In her inside office Megan Moreland, the Executive Director, lets me hold her baby while she tells me about the aggressive voter suppression activity in her State.



In Summit County there are two Democratic members of the Election Board and two Republican members. Of course, controversies end in a tie vote, which is broken by the highly partisan Republican Secretary of State, Jon Husted. The same Husted who tried to restrict voters hours for early voting. As a result black Churches would not have the final Sunday before election to get their people to the polls. At this point the numbers for early voting are double what they were in the last election and absentee voting has surpassed 2008 numbers, five days ago.

After a tie vote, broken by Secretary of State Husted, the Summit County Board reduced the number of precincts from 475 to 298, resulting in many changed polling places. There is concern (because voters voted in their old precincts for the

primary) that there will be much confusion about polling places for the general election when they have to vote in their new precincts.

Also, the Summit County Board of Elections would not approve a new location for early voting that would have allowed easy disabled access and insisted on another location.

The campaign has worked hard to make voters more comfortable with early voting and talked about use of the social security card as an easy form of photo ID. They've also focused on encouraging voters to complete their vote with down ballot voting. Democrats were waving a sample Democratic- marked Ballot at a corner outside the restricted, non-campaigning area, near a polling site recently and the Director of the Board of Elections and the Sheriff said that was illegal activity.

I picked up an OHIO VOTES EARLY sticker on my way out.

Election Protection

Back to California where I'll participate in Election Protection efforts as I did in the mid-term election where I went to the Elmhurst Jr. High precinct in Oakland to check the voters register and talk to the precinct supervisor about any problems.

San Francisco and Los Angeles typically run strong efforts with phone banks of lawyers from the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights under the Law answering voter and

precinct watcher's inquiries about voting requirements and precinct locations on Election Day. It's exciting to hear the buzz of calls from all over the U.S. and follow up on the more complicated problems with contacts to the County Registrars or the Secretary of State's office.

Both the Democratic Party and Election Protection need poll watchers on Election Day. Interested citizens can also participate before and after Election Day by observing at the County Registrar's office where Voter Registrations are validated and where Absentee Ballots are counted. In Los Angeles County, I observed the validation process as signatures are compared by the computer and sometimes bounced out for further check by hand. Also, I observed the counting of absentee ballots and the random sampling process where ballots are picked by tumbling lottery ball numbers in a cage.

In Broward County, Fla. where I observed in 2004, I saw Republican poll watchers handling batches of provisional ballots at a Union polling place and I immediately reported it to the Supervisor.

This year's trip reminded me of that phrase attributed to both Thomas Jefferson and John Curran, an early Mayor of Dublin, Ireland, "Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty". Let's stay vigilant this election.

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