1999 Philadelphia Mayoral Primary

The Street Victory, May 1999

Where could a onetime hotdog vendor and rabble-rouser win a major party nomination for mayor? Yes, Philadelphia is the correct answer.

Former hotdog vendor and City Council President John Street won the Democratic nomination, but in an unexpected fashion. Pre-election polls showed him narrowly winning, which he did by four percentage points. But no one thought he would win 35.4% of the popular vote.

Marty Weinberg trailed with 31.3% of the popular vote. John White Jr., who came on strong at the end of the campaign, won 21.7%, and Happy Fernandez and Dwight Evans, who saw their support collapse, got 6.3% and 4.7%, respectively. Unexpectedly, two candidates won more than 30% of the popular vote.

Skeptics believed that with three minority candidates in the race - Evans and White in addition to Street - a white candidate would emerge victorious. Street defied conventional wisdom. He faced a series of brutally negative commercials aired throughout the campaign by Marty Weinberg and late in the campaign by Republican candidate Sam Katz. Street was portrayed as an irresponsible brawler who failed to pay his taxes. Exit the old Street. The new Street was the Council President who was Ed Rendell's principal ally in reversing the city's financial fortune, a social and fiscal conservative who steadfastly managed Rendell's agenda through City Council. Rendell's staunch support of Street inoculated the latter from the effect of the negative commercials.

Street also owed his success to a strong white crossover vote. He ran unexpectedly strong in white wards in the city. Overall, perhaps 25 to 30% of white voters cast a vote for one of three black candidates, with Street getting the lion share of the crossover.

He also benefited from voters who decided late in the race to leave their first choice, Fernandez and Evans, and switch to Street because they recognized the contest was essentially a two-person race. Apparently these voters believed that Street was a far better choice than Weinberg, whose negative commercials and lack of a strong political resume in the end hurt his election possibilities.

Despite a record 15 million being spent in the mayoral race, only 40% of the city's voters showed up at the polls. That's about 300,000 Democrats, a significant decline from the 350,000 who voted in the last contested mayoral primary in 1991. City voters never got energized or passionate in a campaign that featured millions of dollars spent on tough negative advertisement, proving once again that negative campaigning depresses turnout. In this case, the Street strategy of running above the fray, using positive, unifying themes, stressing his continuity with Rendell, produced a winning formula.

Now, after surviving a bruising negative barrage, Street has emerged from the primary much stronger than anyone imagined. His Republican opponent Sam Katz will obviously work hard to
win the Weinberg base in South Philadelphia, the River Wards and the Northeast. Ironically, the attacks on Street in the primary may actually have helped him by airing the dirty linen so early in the campaign season. If Street, and it's a big if, can unite a portion of the white Democratic political establishment and its followers, he should be the next mayor of Philadelphia. He certainly must be considered the favorite to win, given the 7-2 Democratic voter registration edge and the fact that the last Republican mayor elected was in 1947.

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