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Populism, Organization and Conviction: How Paul Wellstone Won Elections

Today, the silence that Senator Paul Wellstone's progressive voice once filled is deafening. The plane crash that took his life in late October, 13 days before Election Day, was an agonizing tragedy on many levels.

His absence is especially poignant because Wellstone would have won his re-election campaign and would now be serving his third term in the U.S. Senate. No fewer than five separate polls taken before the crash, including those of both major Twin Cities newspapers, showed Wellstone holding a lead of 4 to 8 points. For more than a year, Wellstone had withstood a barrage of coordinated attacks from his opponent, the national Republicans, and insurance and drug industry front groups. He was accused of everything from taxing the dead (because he did not support complete repeal of the estate tax) to supporting policies that supposedly would have led to the death of more American soldiers in Afghanistan. And still he held a lead, just as his campaign organization was about to start its massive get out the vote effort-which many analysts were estimating could have added at least an additional percentage point to his vote.

In fact, he had held the lead since right after October 3, when he announced his opposition to Bush's go-it-alone resolution on Iraq. Despite being pummeled on television by his opponent for being "soft" on terrorism, Wellstone jumped into a 4 to 5 point lead that held until the crash.

Why does it matter that Wellstone was going to win this last election? It's important because it was to be a particularly significant victory with national lessons. He was bucking all the trends. He was an outspoken progressive, running against the hand-picked candidate of Karl Rove and the Bush White House, winning in a year when Democrats were pounded across the country. He boldly stood up for what he believed in a year when Democrats struggled to find a message. He mobilized hundreds of thousands of people through his campaign organization in a year when Republicans did better than Democrats on the ground in many states.

How did he win three elections? He employed a campaign strategy that combined a consistent message with grassroots organizing and personal authenticity. At the core of

the strategy were three elements: a sharp focus on an economic populist message, an emphasis on building a campaign off a strong, organized base, and having the courage of his convictions despite the political winds.

Focus on a Populist, Progressive Economic Message

The new campaign ad that was to begin on the day of the plane crash had Paul Wellstone looking directly into the camera saying:

"I don't represent the big oil companies, I don't represent the big pharmaceutical companies, I don't represent the Enrons of this world, but you know what, they already have great representation in Washington. It's the rest of the people that need it. I represent the people of Minnesota."

This bold, clear message about being on your side, combined with a positive economic agenda of what Wellstone called "kitchen table issues": jobs, health care and retirement security, resonated strongly with our core supporters-voters who want someone who truly represents "the little guy" in Washington.

Interestingly, Wellstone's focus on a populist, progressive economic message was also working with enough swing voters in the suburbs of Minnesota to win the election. An important segment of the swing vote in this last election responded to a message about being on their side when it came to corporate interests that seemed to be gaining too much power. Wellstone had found a winning message that galvanized his base and appealed to a sizable portion of independent voters who are not doing well economically, who share some anti-establishment feelings, and who want to see change.

Paul Wellstone put it another way in his book *Conscience of a Liberal*: "Politics is not about left, right and center. It is about speaking to the concerns and circumstances of people's lives." He went on: "People yearn for a politics that speaks to and includes them."

But the title of his book, *Conscience of a Liberal* is a misnomer: Paul Wellstone cobbled together winning majorities because in the end, he was always less of a liberal and more a true populist.

Base-Building and Volunteer Mobilizing

Wellstone's winning campaigns were all underpinned by a large, energized, and organized base of support. Through hard work, a message that excited and moved people, organization and thorough training, he built deep support among many diverse constituencies-farmers, labor, environmentalists, communities of color, educators, students, new immigrant populations-and knit that together into a formidable organization. He never stopped employing strategies that nurtured and enlarged his committed base of supporters.

Winning the excited support of a large base was just the first step. His campaign organization focused on turning tens of thousands of strong supporters into active volunteers. These volunteers would receive training and then plug into a statewide organization that worked to continue to expand the base vote, win over undecided voters, and then massively mobilize that base vote on Election Day.

This base-building required a serious commitment of resources. A large, skilled organizing staff with strong support is needed to properly run a field-intensive campaign. Wellstone did raise money—in the 2002 election cycle, a record 122,000 donors gave an average of \$50. Instead of dumping it all into television ads, he invested in developing professional organizers who knew how to build the infrastructure required to recruit, train, and effectively utilize tens of thousands of volunteers.

This method of organizing also became part of the message. With thousands of people active in his campaign, Paul Wellstone had no trouble establishing himself as the candidate of regular folks, while his opponents looked like the candidates of wealthy donors and corporate special interests.

The Politics of Conviction

In countless conversations with Minnesota voters, Wellstone heard comments like: "I don't always agree with you, but I like it that I know where you stand." This sentiment was voiced particularly when he took very politically risky stands like his vote against the Iraq resolution less than a month before the election, and his vote against Clinton's welfare reform bill late in the 1996 Senate race. When faced with these difficult votes he would ask himself a simple question: Can I live with my decision after it's made? For Wellstone, there was no option but to do what he believed was right, tell the voters where he stood, and let the chips fall as they may. It was a model of rare principled leadership that made donors and supporters from other states often claim that Paul Wellstone was their senator too.

It turned out that the right way—this Wellstone way—was smart politics. A perfect example was Wellstone's announcement of his opposition to the Iraq resolution: his approval ratings actually went up. Minnesotans, even if they didn't agree with his position, expected nothing less from him. For Wellstone, conviction politics were winning politics.

These lessons of Paul Wellstone's political career have implications for politics across the ideological spectrum. His successes offer a particular model of political leadership for progressives who want to win elections: show voters what you believe in and that you'll stick to your guns; mobilize an army of volunteers; and focus on an economic populist message that resonates with liberals and independents alike.

At a recent meeting of Democrats in Washington, Presidential candidate Howard Dean used a famous Paul Wellstone line when, to thunderous applause, he declared that he represents the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party. At least one Presidential

contender so far has figured out what Wellstone knew-that a winning formula can include being unafraid to be bold and clear in your beliefs, and you build your campaign from a fired-up and committed base.

Paul Wellstone was, at his core, an organizer. He believed in teaching, training, and mobilizing people to become leaders in their communities. What's more, he believed this work was his responsibility and obligation to those without a voice and to future generations. If that plane had not crashed, Wellstone would have won, and would have continued to teach progressives how to win elections, even in a hostile political environment. So it will be up to those left behind to carry on the work that Paul and Sheila Wellstone would be doing today.

Jeff Blodgett ran Wellstone's 1990, 1996 and 2002 campaigns. He is now working with the Wellstone family to start Wellstone Action, an organization that will carry on Paul and Sheila Wellstone's work by training a new generation of campaign professionals, activists, and candidates for office.