

# TRANSFORMING DEMOCRACY

*Legislative Campaign Committees  
and Political Parties*

Daniel M. Shea

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and Political Parties

*Daniel M. Shea*

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## *Transforming Democracy*

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*For Christine, my companion*

## *Preface*

Party politics was an important part of my formative years. My father, Dennis Shea, chose teaching government as a career and found time to aid local, and occasionally state and national, Democratic candidates. Among many posts, he is perhaps proudest of having served on Robert Kennedy's staff in 1968. My mother, Rosemary Shea, embraced a similar path, spending several years as county party chair and as a delegate to state and national party conventions. Her tenacity, grit, and sense of purpose have helped set a high standard for party activism in Central New York.

It seemed only natural to follow in their footsteps and after receiving a Master of Arts in Campaign Management, I returned to New York State to join the cause—this time with the Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee (DACC). This unit is perhaps the most sophisticated, well-funded, state-level legislative campaign committee in the nation, and it was truly a thrill to be a part of it. During my stint I was in charge of, or directly involved in, scores of competitive state house races.

It did not take long, however, to discern an omnipotent strain between DACC and other Democratic party organizations. We rarely joined forces with county party committees, and while we were happy to use the State Committee's bulk rate account (the lowest by law), we hardly ever consulted with those folks about what we were doing. In fact, on numerous occasions hostilities broke out over strategy, tactics, and resources. They were certainly not the enemy—but neither were we on the same team.

Upon returning to graduate school, it was surprising to find a lack of scholarly work on state legislative campaign committees (LCCs). The scholarship that did exist often merged these organizations with traditional party units in a neat conceptual bundle. Could scholars simply be on the wrong track? Perhaps New York was the exception rather than the rule? In any event, the new, complex dynamic between state LCCs and traditional party organizations throughout

the United States remained unexplored in the literature on parties. This book represents several years and untold hours trying to sort out this issue.

I am indebted to the many state, county, and local party leaders who took time out of their busy schedules to discuss the workings of their organization and its relationship with the legislative campaign committees of their state. The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, Center for Legislative Studies, at the State University of New York at Albany and the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron provided various forms of financial support. The Department of Political Science at the State University of New York at Albany also granted monetary assistance. Dr. Martin Edelman, Chair of the Department, was always willing to aid my cause and Eleanor Leggieri and Maxine Norman supplied considerable help with transcription and word processing.

Sally Friedman has not only been a consistent source of inspiration and counsel, but a good friend. Her "can do" attitude often rubbed off, making momentous obstacles appear less so. I am also grateful to Robert Nakamura, John Green, Ralph Goldman, Malcolm Jewell, and John White for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. At SUNY Press, Clay Morgan and Christine Lynch did a superb job of tightening the book and keeping me on schedule.

Several graduate students at the University of Albany had a hand in this project. Barbara Dinehart was a dependable sounding board, a tireless copy editor, and fine confidant. Christopher Grill, David Olson, and Martin Shaffer, for better or worse, each owns a piece of the book.

I certainly have a debt of gratitude to Michael Malbin. It was under his recommendation that the Rockefeller Institute provided resources to get the ball rolling. His comments and keen insight during each phase of the project were indispensable. Dr. Malbin wishes for his students to do well and goes the extra step to see it happen. I am fortunate to have worked with such an accomplished scholar and teacher.

Finally, I shall always be indebted to Anne Hildreth. For over three years her knowledge, constructive criticism, and editing talents helped transform a diffuse set of ideas into a book. Perhaps more importantly, she has been a wonderful friend, always there to push me forward with kind encouragement. Few will have the opportunity to work with such an enthusiastic, insightful mentor.

As much as I might hope to repay these and the many others who have rendered their assistance over the past few years, such an effort is not only unexpected, but impossible—the debt is far too large. The most I might do is to try to repay their attention, encouragement, and kindness to future students, colleagues, and family.

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## *Introduction*

In November of 1985, New York State Assemblyman Andrew Ryan was elected Clinton County District Attorney—thereby vacating his state legislative post in midterm. Ryan had been a member of the Assembly for eighteen years and by all accounts served his constituents well. Although never rising to the higher ranks of the Republican Caucus, he was a competent legislator and a strong voice for the Adirondack North Country.

Ryan's district, the 110th, was located in the far northeast corner of the state. Bordered to the south by the Adirondack Park and to the north by Canada, the district included all of Clinton County and a small portion of Franklin County. While historically a Republican stronghold, voter registration in the 110th was roughly divided between the two major parties. There were even signs of growing Democratic strength. Ronald Reagan, for example, received only 51 percent of the vote in 1980 and 55 percent in 1984—modest figures in comparison to neighboring districts. The Clinton County Legislature was evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, and several of the larger towns were controlled by the Democrats, e.g., Plattsburgh and Messena. Moreover, both the Clinton and Franklin County Democratic party committees were active, often providing significant support to their candidates.

Ryan safely held his seat despite the mounting Democratic presence; in most elections, he faced little or no opposition. As long as he wished to remain, Ryan was perceived as a permanent fixture. His election to District Attorney, however, triggered considerable interest. In an open-seat contest the district was no longer a safe bet for the Republicans.

The special election that followed Ryan's retirement engaged a battle of wits, resources, and determination that extended far beyond the North Country. For local Democrats, it signified a rare opportunity to use their growing organization to secure a voice in the state legislature. For local Republicans, it represented a chance to stem the

Democratic tide and maintain a long-held seat. At the state level, the election was an opportunity for Speaker Stanley Fink to flex his political muscles by utilizing the Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee (DACC). Developed in the 1970s and run by Fink's right-hand lieutenant, Tony Genovesi, DACC was seen as a preeminent legislative campaign machine. While the Democrats held a solid majority in the Assembly, augmenting the Caucus is seen as an important goal for any good speaker. For State Republicans, the special election provided another opportunity to turn national Republican strides into state legislative victories. The state GOP could not afford to lose another member. They, too, would utilize a legislative campaign organization, the Republican Assembly Campaign Committee (RACC). Although the stakes were just one seat in a 150-member body, the people running these campaigns were also playing for power, reputation, momentum, and ego. During the winter of 1986, political eyes were turned toward Clinton County.

By the end of the campaign, the "Plattsburgh Special" would hold a unique place in the history of party politics in New York State. Perhaps more importantly, in many ways this election demonstrated the growing impact of state-level legislative campaign committees and the changing role of traditional party organizations. A profound transformation of state legislative politics and state party dynamics is underway throughout the nation. The special election in New York during the winter of 1986 heralded many of these changes, both positive and negative. The story is worth briefly repeating.

### The Clash and Collapse of the Democrats

Friction between the local Democratic party organization (the "Locals") and the Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee began almost immediately after Ryan announced his retirement. New York State Election Law directs county party organizations within an assembly district, through a joint convention, to nominate candidates for special elections. A primary is not needed. The Franklin and Clinton County Democratic committees held a joint meeting and emerged with a candidate.

At the same time, DACC undertook an extensive benchmark survey. It tested issues, themes, and the appeal of numerous local personalities. The individual to emerge from the poll as the best candidate was *not* the candidate chosen by the local party organizations. As a result, the choice of the nominee marked the first in a series of disputes between the two camps. Perhaps as a sign of good faith, the

Locals yielded to the professionalism and sophistication of the legislative campaign committee. The candidate was to be Robert Garrow, a well-respected county legislator. "After all," noted a local party official several years later, "they were going to spend tons of money. What did we know; we were just country bumpkins."

Under strong advice from DACC, the Locals were asked to gather enough signatures to put Garrow on a newly created line. Unique to New York and Connecticut, cross-over party endorsements allow candidates to combine their vote totals from two or more ballot positions.<sup>1</sup> Although the effectiveness of such a move is questionable,<sup>2</sup> the traditional logic is "the more lines the better"—particularly in a close race. DACC pushed hard for the second ballot spot, but, because the requisite signatures could only be gathered by voters registered in the district, the legion of personnel sent from Albany could provide no help. The most they could do was prod the Locals—which they did frequently. The signature gathering process was slow, tedious work, especially in the harsh North Country winter. Anxiety and hostility between the camps grew.

The relationship worsened when, for whatever reason (there are several rival explanations), the leaders of the county party committees failed to submit to the local Boards of Election the necessary paperwork to list Garrow on the ballot as the Democratic candidate. A tremendous blunder had occurred, and Garrow's chance of victory was greatly damaged by the oversight. DACC turned up the heat on the Locals to gather four thousand signatures, well over twice the necessary amount, in order to secure the second line—now the only line. Without that ballot position, the election would be over before it began.

The residual effect of the gaffe was a new source of animosity between DACC and local party activists. DACC officials, now financially deep in the Garrow campaign, were furious. Without the Democratic line, the chances of success were slim, and they did not hide their disappointment and frustration. From the Locals' perspective, the omnipresent pressure of "Fink's Raiders" was an intrusion on their turf. Although DACC supplied dozens of workers and trunks of money, it was, after all, "run by New York City hacks who knew little of North Country life or politics."<sup>3</sup>

The growing hostility did not end there. Perhaps the greatest area of conflict centered around strategic decisions during the campaign. The two camps passionately disagreed over the appropriate way to reach voters. The Locals believed radio and television were the best

way to disseminate Garrow's message (the Plattsburgh/Burlington area is a relatively cheap, inclusive media market). Genovesi, having been seasoned in New York City politics, chose to rely on direct mail. It was, he argued, the best way to ensure that the entire "target group" would be exposed to Garrow's name and message. The Locals argued forcefully that electronic media were less expensive and more effective, but because DACC held control of the purse strings they were never used.

By the end of the campaign nearly twenty *district wide* mailings were sent on Garrow's behalf. They were, by most counts, drab pieces of mail. According to Genovesi, the idea was to use black and white to suggest (on a subliminal level) newspapers, ergo, legitimacy and trustworthiness. Because they were all mailed over a short period of time, it was not uncommon for voters to receive several pieces each day. Genovesi argued that this type of saturation would increase the candidate's name recognition, but the Locals believed the technique would only feed the time-honored theme that all Democrats were "pawns of New York City interests."<sup>4</sup> This was not, they exclaimed, the way candidates ran for office in the North Country. If it did increase Garrow's name recognition, it would be in a negative direction.

As for the candidate, his loyalties were torn. He could side with the Locals at the risk of losing his entire campaign treasury, or he could play along with Genovesi and DACC, at the risk of alienating his friends and fellow party regulars—as well as losing the campaign.

By election day, hostilities had reached a boiling point. The Locals had renounced their association with DACC, and Genovesi had the windows of his headquarters covered; neither the media nor party volunteers were allowed to enter. DACC operatives worked on their own, often duplicating the work of the Locals. Although DACC made a tremendous last minute push—as many as forty people were sent from Albany during the last weekend of the campaign to "hit the streets," and literature was mailed by the truckload—Garrow lost the election 15,130 to 11,988.

Within hours of the polls closing, the DACC entourage departed Plattsburgh leaving behind a legacy of hostility that has lingered for years. As an interesting and perhaps relevant epilogue, six of the DACC operatives involved in the Plattsburgh Special were fired. Several claimed they were let go because they had criticized DACC policy. This type of divided loyalty was deemed intolerable. Although enrollment numbers remain roughly even, Albany Democrats have avoided involvement in the North Country.