

How I won friends — or at least influenced people

There's a political ritual that takes place every two years. State law says with its usual clarity that the second Monday after the Tuesday of the primary election that the Democrat and Republican central committees reorganize and elect officers. The other stipulation by the State is that precinct committeemen cast a "weighted vote" for officers, which is the total of ballots taken for one's party in each precinct. When there aren't any primary contests, the numbers are low. For example, this year 33 people took Democratic ballots in my precinct, so I had 33 votes to cast. In 1998, when there was a Democratic party primary contest for Sheriff, 198 voters requested Democratic ballots in my precinct.

The central committees at this point consist of precinct committeemen who are elected at the primary election. Additional committeemen may be appointed later, but

not for this political party convention.

Most people have no idea what dramas can take place at these party conventions. The Knox County Republicans re-elected it's current chair and as far as we know things were pretty cut and dried this time. But then, what do we know?

In the Democratic party, however, we had a contest between our incumbent chairman and a hard-bitten old political babe who wanted to take her place — me. There are always reasons why contests arise in the party organization. First, the darn party is filled with people who love politics, full of ambition, who like to tread through mine fields of emotion, strong opinions, thrills and disappointment. Secondly, being a party chairman is stressful, a job that's never free of criticism. When the criticism gets too severe, someone else will probably step forward.

Here's the stuff they never teach you in political science — how to get elected chairman of a central committee. I started my campaign for chairman of the Knox County Democrats six months ago. Why? Because precinct committeemen are elected in the primary election (March) and they had to file by early December, 1999. So the first step was to encourage loyal Democrats to place their names on the ballot as candidates for the office of precinct committeeman. I called people, gave them petition forms and print-outs of the past Democratic primary voters in their precincts. Some people I told I was running for chairman; others I did not. With the recruiting efforts of two or three of us, plus the incumbents who were running for reelection, we had 24 candidates for precinct committeemen — two competing against each other in one precinct. The Republicans had the exact same number.

After the filing deadline and holidays were over, I slowly started communicating with the candidates for committeemen. I had lunch with several groups of people, (they paid for theirs) and gave them a letter explaining my reasons for running and a résumé of my experience. Others had been committed to me from the beginning. Others were unsure of what to do.

Other friends in the party played a role, influencing each other and the candidates. The March 21st primary election produced 23 elected precinct committeemen.

By the week before the party convention, which was held Monday night, my ducks were pretty much in row. A week ago I invited those whom I was sure supported me to my house for a strategy meeting. They all knew if they showed up at the meeting, the die was cast. We had a good turnout — others called to give their support. The response was such that I knew I would be elected chair — if they all got to the

convention at the courthouse Monday night. It was the time to plan strategy — motions to make, who will nominate whom — what other officers we wanted to elect. Our slate was a combination of incumbent and new officers.

By Monday night at 7pm everyone was tense and not entirely happy with the situation. Many of the new committeemen had never had to vote openly for anyone — it's not an easy thing to do. I watched the convention arrivals and mentally counted the bodies. I had already had two calls from committeemen who would have to be out of town — a total of 83 votes lost. My husband was so nervous he was nowhere to be seen and waited for me at the bar at WD's.

A temporary chair and two tellers were selected. Nominations were made and seconded, then each candidate for party chair made short speeches on their own behalf. It was nerve-wracking. The weighted votes were cast and every single person who said they would vote for me did. My hard work, plotting and scheming paid off. I assumed the chairmanship and continued with the rest of the meeting. It was a subdued group. The past chair was obviously stunned and hurt. She had known I was her opponent for months but it didn't help much. It really wasn't fun — not yet anyway.

After the meeting a group of us joined my husband to celebrate. Today is a day of recovering and beginning anew. Only time will heal some of the hurt feelings, but political parties have survived these things before. Politics is a tough business. It is not for the weak. Now the goal is to work for Democratic candidates and our party.

The day has been filled with phone calls, e-mails and even flowers. I'm beginning to enjoy the success I earned with hard work and planning. And I'm proud to be chair of the Knox County Democrats.

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