



Introduction

Philadelphia Battlefields: Disruptive Candidacies and Upset Elections in a Changing City is about political campaigns undertaken in Philadelphia during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that were extraordinarily successful despite the opposition of the city's political establishment. The book describes the origins, outcomes, and factors that influenced successful "insurgent" campaigns, based on an analysis of election data, descriptions of the social and economic environment in which these campaigns were organized and implemented, and interviews with participants.

The book's purpose is to describe and analyze urban political dynamics in a typical postindustrial city by focusing on how strategies for these campaigns were operationalized, as well as to show how they were influenced by local history, economic conditions, and population trends. The research makes use of election data and data-mapping tools that have become much more accessible in recent years, making it possible to describe and analyze voting patterns at the neighborhood, district, and citywide levels in greater depth and to explain how they influenced election outcomes.

This topic is particularly deserving of attention for several reasons:

- Although urban Democratic Party organizations that have traditionally been dominant in most older cities continue to possess significant political power, their influence has weakened substantially during recent decades. A description of the campaign strat-

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egies that proved successful in overcoming party opposition and an explanation of how changes in urban demographics, governance, and the economy contributed to the outcomes of insurgent candidacies sheds new light on the factors that have influenced social change, political activism, and municipal governance during the past half-century.

- The period following the 2016 presidential election has been characterized by a resurgence in political activism, and much of this activism has originated and grown in older metropolitan areas. By providing detailed information and insights about the ways in which insurgent candidacies have succeeded, I hope that this book may serve as a frame of reference for individuals and groups seeking to organize or participate in political campaigns or reform initiatives.
- The creators of all of the strategies described in this book were seeking, among other goals, to inspire constructive civic engagement—to encourage citizens to exercise their citizenship by becoming more knowledgeable about candidates and policy issues and participating enthusiastically in campaigns and elections. The chronically low voter turnout in many U.S. elections provides ample evidence of the need to find better ways to get citizens involved—to more closely align civic engagement with individual and group self-interest.

Municipal Politics and the Urban Economy

Most students of urban development would agree that older cities recovering from postindustrial economic disinvestment need responsible municipal leadership and capable governance to achieve future success. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to the process by which municipal leaders have been chosen during the past half-century and the circumstances under which political activism or political reform movements have brought about the election of outstanding leaders. As more older central cities begin to experience downtown revitalization accompanied by gentrification in some neighborhoods and an influx of immigrants in others, a greater understanding of the electoral process can guide the design and implementation of policies to stimulate increased voter turnout, promote broader civic engagement, and support the election of capable, well-qualified leaders.

Philadelphia is a city that has undergone significant economic hardships but has also achieved some noteworthy success in stimulating reinvestment during recent years; it is also a place where, under some circumstances,

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insurgent candidates for office have won elections despite the opposition of the city's dominant political party. Their successes were based on creative and timely campaign strategies combined with the successful candidates' perceived responsiveness to voter concerns about broader social and economic issues such as jobs, taxes, racial divisions, and neighborhood change. Gaining a better understanding of the relationship between these successful strategies and the context in which they are designed and implemented can provide useful insights into the best ways to achieve higher levels of community participation in the electoral process and help capable individuals gain election to office.

Organization of the Book

Philadelphia Battlefields is organized as a three-part work.

Part I consists of eight chapters, seven of which describe a campaign or a sequence of related campaigns: newcomer Rebecca Rhynhart's landslide victory over a veteran incumbent in a citywide 2017 race for Philadelphia city controller; a Democratic takeover of Philadelphia city government, engineered by business and civic leaders in 1951, following a century of dominance by Republican administrations; Chaka Fattah's successful use of the communication and organizing skills he developed as a neighborhood activist to mobilize participation in successful campaigns for the Pennsylvania legislature and U.S. Congress; strategies undertaken by Thomas Foglietta and his supporters to pursue the opportunity to introduce capable new leadership into South Philadelphia politics in the wake of the 1980 Abcam scandal; the approach adopted by former prosecutor Edward Rendell to defeat an incumbent Philadelphia district attorney at a time when warring factions were battling for control of the Democratic Party; Maria Quiñones-Sánchez's success in winning a city council seat, the first Hispanic woman to do so, despite the active opposition of Hispanic elected officials allied with veteran party leaders; and the differing experiences of individual members of a reform slate of judicial candidates, nominated by Pennsylvania governor Robert Casey and known as the "Casey Five," as they worked to secure Democratic Party support for election to common pleas court over the opposition of key party leaders. Each of these chapters includes a chronology table that shows the relationship between the election that is the primary focus of the chapter and other elections that preceded it and that, in some instances, influenced the campaign strategies of one or more of the candidates in these elections.

This part ends with a description of similarities among the campaigns, as well as a discussion of whether their successful outcomes should be interpreted as representing fundamental changes in local government or simply

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viewed as one-off victories, based largely on serendipitous circumstances that advanced individual political careers.

Part II consists of four chapters, focusing on the experience of political activism from different perspectives, including those of three women who entered the local political environment at different phases in Philadelphia's late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century history; representatives of three advocacy organizations: Americans for Democratic Action, the Committee of Seventy, and Philadelphia 3.0; participants in three Democratic ward organizations that differ from their predecessors in ways that suggest new opportunities for change; and representatives of congregations of faith who have been active in local politics in different ways.

Part III ends the book with two chapters. The first describes the expectations surrounding Philadelphia's May 2019 Democratic primary elections, which many activists viewed as presenting an opportunity to place reformers in key positions in city government, as well as the factors that influenced the successful and unsuccessful outcomes of these elections. The book concludes with a description of the challenges that need to be addressed to increase the effectiveness of the political process, improve municipal governance, and introduce a new generation of political leadership at the local and state level.

Learning from Experience

Not long after graduating from college, I won an uncontested election and became a Democratic committeeperson in West Philadelphia's 46th Ward, representing a division that included a substantial population of University of Pennsylvania students, faculty, and staff, as well as doctors and lawyers, schoolteachers, health and human service workers, and unemployed, retired, and homebound families and elderly people.

The first ward meeting I attended was held in a cramped storefront a few blocks away from the Penn campus. The ward leader was Lucien Blackwell, a city council member who was also head of the local chapter of the long-shoremen's union and who had been a boxer before entering the armed forces. Councilman Blackwell called the meeting to order, and the other committeepersons, about fifty of them, took their seats on folding chairs organized in rows, classroom style.

In previous years, I had participated in many meetings of neighborhood organizations and civic groups; but the composition of this group was more diverse, in terms of age, race, income, educational attainment, employment, and household status than that of any other meeting I had ever attended.

Imagining Councilman Blackwell as a boxer was not difficult. He spoke forcefully and without nuance. Arthur Hicks, a fellow committeeperson

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who had become acquainted with Blackwell when both were working on the Delaware River docks, would say, “Lucien isn’t the period—he’s the exclamation mark.”

But Councilman Blackwell was not an authoritarian leader. He went out of his way to ensure that every voice was heard and that every individual had a chance to participate. During the weeks preceding the annual Democratic primary elections, candidates for office came to the ward meeting, presented themselves, and responded to questions. Blackwell’s stature as a Democratic City Committee leader ensured that candidates would show up and would be responsive to questions from the committeepeople.

West Philadelphia state representative James Williams passed away while in office, and a well-attended funeral service was held at Hickman Temple Memorial Church. Several rows of pews had been reserved for the 46th Ward committeepeople, up front and to the side, and the committeepeople entered as a group and took their seats together. It was as though we were members of a team—a group of people who might not all be well acquainted with one another individually, but who respected one another, took one another seriously, and got together when needed to uphold an important responsibility.

Before each election day, I circulated a letter containing information about the upcoming election, a description of the offices that would appear on the ballot, and information about candidates whom I recommended. In the letter that I circulated before one primary, I recommended that voters vote no on the question of whether to retain Bernard Snyder, an incumbent common pleas court judge who had been endorsed by the Democratic Party but who had been charged with misconduct in office. The “no” votes in my division, along with many other “no” votes cast citywide, resulted in Snyder’s removal from the judiciary. After the election, I sent Councilman Blackwell a letter explaining that I was returning my “street money” (the cash that ward leaders routinely distribute to committeepeople before elections, ostensibly to cover “election day expenses,” but rarely documented in campaign finance reports) because I had not supported one of the endorsed candidates. I received a letter from him two days later, along with the street money. The letter said, “You are an excellent committeepeople, and this money belongs to you.”

At the time, I had also been active in Cedar Park Neighbors (CPN), a community organization whose members had become concerned about a city fire station located at a five-points intersection on the Baltimore Avenue neighborhood commercial corridor. The building had been vacated when the fire company relocated to new quarters a few blocks away. With others who were interested in finding an appropriate reuse for the building before it deteriorated and became a nuisance or hazard, I participated in a series of

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neighborhood meetings to discuss alternatives. The result was a proposal by CPN to create a joint-venture partnership that would take ownership of the building and develop it as a neighborhood retail center organized as a farmers market hall. The city administration, which had a policy of selling surplus properties at auction, opposed the proposal, but Councilman Blackwell supported it, probably because of my involvement, and the property was transferred to the new partnership. After years of uncertainty, missteps, and controversy, the building became the location of Dock Street Brewery, a valued neighborhood asset. The only other realistic alternative that had been proposed during the dialogue leading to this outcome was the demolition of the building for use as a surface parking lot.¹

At the time, Baltimore Avenue had been experiencing years of economic disinvestment, and a public auction of the firehouse building would probably not have attracted a lot of interest. If the real estate market had been stronger, Councilman Blackwell might not have supported the CPN proposal, despite my involvement; committee person status did not guarantee that every wish would be fulfilled. However, this experience helped me understand how participation in political activism at the grassroots level could help advance neighborhood organization and community reinvestment goals.

In later years, I participated in political campaigns as a campaign treasurer and campaign manager; then I ran as a candidate for Philadelphia sheriff in the 2011 Democratic primary. At the time, the sheriff's office was under federal investigation for mismanaging tax sales, the auctions at which tax-delinquent properties are sold to recover unpaid tax revenue. As a former city housing director (from 1992 to 2001), I had been concerned about the purchase of tax sale properties by speculators and negligent absentee investors, and I had written commentary pieces, subsequently published in the citywide news media, calling for the sheriff's office to be reformed or replaced. Accordingly, my candidacy was based on a pledge that, once elected, I would work to transfer the responsibilities of the sheriff's office to municipal departments that were already managing similar responsibilities (such as the Law Department and the Department of Public Property), after which I would close the office and resign. I did not harbor any unrealistic expectations about the outcome of my candidacy—which, needless to say, was not given serious consideration by Democratic Party leadership—but I felt that it was important to draw more attention to these issues. Campaigning for office gave me an opportunity to share my views with neighborhood audiences in every area of the city, and the experience gave me new insights about how an insurgent candidacy can succeed or fail (with my candidacy as a good example of the latter).

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All of these experiences helped me view the political process as, at its best, an engine of democracy and gain a better understanding of the ways in which we, the citizens of this republic, have grown accustomed to the use of a highly inefficient vehicle—the political party system in its current form—to deliver this value. *Philadelphia Battlefields* is intended to pose a related question: In the interest of advancing toward true democracy, can we find new ways of making this vehicle function effectively or replacing it with something much better?

Limitations and Aspirations

Because this book is narrowly focused on campaigns and elections, many of the broader topics that would ordinarily be part of a work of this kind are addressed only briefly or not at all. To devote attention to political dynamics, I have tried to limit coverage of urban history, demographic and economic trends, and public policy issues to include only basic information that I think is needed to place the political campaigns in context. A more comprehensive work would have devoted much more attention to the powerful influence of African American and Latino media on voter choices during the past half-century; to the growing influence of LGBTQ constituencies in municipal politics; to the growth of political activism in Philadelphia's Asian American community; to the role that building trades, municipal employee, and service worker unions have played in Philadelphia politics; to the different ways in which congregations of faith across different denominations support voter education and encourage political activism; and to campaign financing strategies and campaign finance oversight policies. I hope that these important topics will be regarded as attractive prospects for future research by others.

Although it would be relevant to include comparisons between Philadelphia and other cities in a book of this kind, they do not appear in *Philadelphia Battlefields*, in part because I wanted to focus in depth on the political environment in a city that I know well but also because of significant differences between Philadelphia and other cities that pose particular research challenges. In many other cities, for example, elections are managed by county governments; in Philadelphia, county government functions are consolidated within the municipal infrastructure, making apples-to-apples comparisons more complicated. In addition, digitized election records are more accessible in Philadelphia than they are in many other places, for reasons described in the Acknowledgments. As digitized election data, both current and historical, become more readily available in other places, new opportunities to conduct worthwhile comparative research will emerge.

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I encourage readers of *Philadelphia Battlefields* to bear in mind that more than a few of the political leaders who currently have the most influence in shaping statewide and national policies—both for better and for worse—began their careers as elected officials representing relatively small legislative districts or as officeholders who were elected to manage relatively discrete municipal and county government responsibilities. With this consideration in mind, I hope that this book will encourage readers to consider participating in politics at the grassroots level, to support the election of candidates who are both principled and pragmatic, and to seek new ways to promote true democracy in an imperfect world.