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HIGHLIGHT:

How a citizen-led reform effort changed the election for Mayor in the City of Brotherly Love

BODY:

IN THE RECENT PHILADELPHIA mayoral election, a handful of citizens calling themselves the Philadelphia Compact stood up and said "no" to the politics of race-baiting and personal attacks. The result: a highly competitive mayoral campaign around issues of importance to the city's future. On election day, instead of being faced with the same dreary "lesser of two evils" choice, Philadelphians had the rare opportunity to choose between two candidates who had shown themselves to be hard-working, smart, fair and aggressive.

The Philadelphia Compact is an example of what citizen organizations can accomplish -- with a smart strategy -- in the rough-and-tumble world of politics. No doubt many conditions and forces contributed to the caliber of campaign dialogue and media coverage of the hotly contested November 1999 election to pick a successor for outgoing two-term Mayor Ed Rendell. However, citizen efforts to encourage the candidates to take the high road appear to have played a critical role in setting the tone of the campaign. It is why those who were involved in the design of the Compact saw it as a potential model for other cities and communities to learn from -- and to improve upon.

City in Transition

If you doubt that a citizen-led effort to improve the caliber of campaigns could ever succeed in your city, consider this: if it could happen in Philadelphia in 1999, it could happen almost anywhere. The series of events leading to this extraordinary election began sometime in 1998 when city leaders began to ponder the future of Philadelphia in the absence of the highly successful and popular Democratic Mayor Ed Rendell, term-limited out of a third term. By most accounts, Rendell pulled Philadelphia from the brink of fiscal and economic extinction and placed it squarely on the road to reclaiming its status as a world-class city. Investment money was beginning to revitalize the inner city, new businesses were springing up everywhere, and national events such as the 2000 Republican National Convention were putting it back on the map.

Anxiety was especially high before the election because many believed Philadelphia was in a sensitive period of growth and the wrong mayor could set it back a generation.

Seven Democrats (including the eventual nominee John Street) and one Republican (Sam Katz) tossed their hats into the mayoral campaign ring early in 1999. In a city where Democrats outnumber Republican registrants by a ratio of almost 4:1, partisan mudslinging is not an issue. More than party, however, race is the dominant factor in the politics of Philadelphia.

Two of the three Democratic frontrunners were African American and the only Republican was white. African-American leaders were terrified that the Democratic primary would split the black vote, leaving a white Democrat and a white Republican in the general election. To increase the odds of a black candidate surviving the primary, some even floated the controversial idea of a special "all-black" primary to take place before the official Democratic primary.

Painful History

The fears of African-American leaders in Philadelphia might seem extreme to outsiders. But of the approximately 980,000 registered voters, whites outnumber blacks by a slim margin of 50 percent to 45 percent and local voters have never been especially well known for tolerant attitudes about race. W. E. B. Dubois wrote his classic, "The Souls of Black Folks," based on the city's deplorable living conditions for blacks around the turn of the century. The Phillies were the last team in major league baseball to sign an African-American player in part because many fans were slow to accept it. As recently as the 1970s, former police chief Frank Rizzo won two terms as mayor with an inflammatory race-based strategy that divided the white and black vote. The outrage of these and other wounds have faded over the years, but the painful scars remain just beneath the surface.

It was little wonder that as the 1999 campaign got underway, pundits and insiders were predicting the most divisive election in memory. Organizations of every stripe appealed to their members for calm in the wake of the fierce combat that was certain to come. Out of the blue, Democratic candidate John Street, a former president of the City Council and an ally of Mayor Rendell, issued a public pledge that he would not make race an issue. He challenged the other candidates to take the same pledge and called on citizen organizations to hold the candidates accountable for running clean, issue-based campaigns.

As expected, experts, insiders and even the other candidates were skeptical about the motives of Street's pledge and whispers of political opportunism were floated across town.

What happened next is a textbook example of how local citizens can make a difference and hold candidates accountable for running hard fought, issue-based campaigns. Instead of dismissing Street's call to action, several well-placed citizens decided to take the initiative and run a shadow campaign alongside the candidates -- as part of an upfront effort to pressure the contenders to run clean, honest, relevant campaigns. They called themselves the Philadelphia Compact and designed a strategic plan based on one simple premise: send the candidates the clear message that the politics of personal attack will not be tolerated. Compact leaders set out to seize the initiative and define

expectations about the quality of the campaign as opposed to doing what civic leaders often do in this city and in others: standing back and waiting for the candidates' campaigns to turn ugly.

It was a big experiment for Philadelphia. Its successes and failures would offer other cities, large and small, important lessons for civic groups across the nation.

The Shadow Campaign: Four Keys

The Philadelphia Compact "shadow campaign" consisted of four complementary activities designed to: (1) Leverage the influence of respected leaders from a range of important constituencies in the city; (2) Frame the issues through citizen forums and periodic polls sponsored by the local university; (3) Work with the media to cover the campaign in ways that help citizens make thoughtful choices; and (4) Encourage as many groups as possible to sponsor candidate debates.

A common mistake made by local civic groups working on so-called "good government" efforts is going it alone, or limiting their coalition to a small group of the usual "good government" crowd. This approach may work between campaigns to keep sporadic media attention on reform activities but will be drowned out in the noise of a frantic election year. Instead, the Compact recruited 20 community leaders to form a Leadership Group who would be responsible for three main activities:

- * First, act as spokespeople for the Compact and be opportunistic in calling on the candidates and the media to focus on the issues.

- * Second, advocate within their own constituencies the need for citizens to call on the candidates to take the high road.

- * Third, work with local organizations to sponsor candidate debates.

The Leadership Group leaders were chosen specifically because they were not the usual figureheads and reform leaders. The Compact decided it was essential for the candidates to understand that the entire civic community expected a clean campaign, not just the usual charges and counter-charges. So the Leadership Group was made of popular local leaders with recognized community constituencies across a broad spectrum such as churches and temples, business associations, ethnic organizations and educational institutions. They were not the types usually associated with framing the context of local electoral politics.

The news media found the star quality of the Leadership Group attractive and because of the constituencies they represented the candidates were motivated to pay attention. The group was able to limit its meetings to eight times over the course of the campaign and it issued five public statements. The fact that such heavy hitters backed the Compact made it a powerful force in the campaign dynamic.

The Leadership Group outlined the goals of the Compact during a kickoff conference at City Hall about four months before the primary. All the local press covered the event and Mayor Rendell gave the keynote address. With snappy presentations and professional media materials, the group outlined its plan.

The Compact would focus the candidates and the media on the issues most important to citizens.

To accomplish this, the Leadership Group would work with The Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania to convene a series of citizen issue forums and periodic public opinion surveys. The results of these forums and surveys would be shared with the media and candidates. Next, the group called on every organization in the city to sponsor a candidate debate or meet-the-candidates' night. Finally, the group made clear it would be a constant voice in the community calling on all candidates and the media to take the high road as the campaign gathered steam.

After the kickoff conference and for the remainder of the campaign, the Leadership Group was involved in five official/public activities. In the weeks leading up to the primary, it issued a press release calling on the candidates to take the high road with respect to advertising and called on the local media to televise more debates.

During the general election campaign, the Leadership Group sent the candidates a questionnaire (based on the results of the citizen forums, below). The responses to the questionnaires were mailed to key organizations in the community, posted on the Compact's Web site, and used by the editorial boards of the print media in their candidate endorsement meetings (see Working with the Media below).

The Leadership Group was asked to devote a relatively small amount of time to official Compact activities, but its presence was enormous. Some individuals drafted various opinion pieces relating to the conduct of the candidates that were published in the local papers, others appeared sporadically on local broadcast news programs to advocate for the goals of the Compact, and still others appealed to their own constituencies to hold the candidates accountable for their conduct. It is doubtful the Compact would have succeeded without the prestige and influence of the individuals on the Leadership Group.

Frame the Issues

One of the Compact's most important goals was to keep the candidates and media focused on the priority issues of average Philadelphians. To that end, the Compact sponsored a series of citizen issue forums supplemented with periodic public opinion polls. The idea was to provide candidates and the media with detailed information about public concerns and priorities and create numerous opportunities for the candidates to respond to those concerns.

There are a number of approaches to organizing issue forums. The most important step is to define the goals of the forums before choosing which process to use. The Compact had two goals for its forums:

- * First, to engage all sections of the community in a broad discussion of priorities for the city's future.
- * Second, work with the candidates and media to focus on those issues over the course of the campaign.

The process the Compact selected lasted several months and involved a total

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of 400 citizens from every political subdivision of the city. It began with citizen discussions in the 20 neighborhoods of Philadelphia and ended by bringing all the participants together for several citizen "issue conventions." The process enabled the citizen participants to identify and prioritize the six most important challenges facing the city. The six issues were Safety, Neighborhoods, Education, Government Reform, Race and Jobs.

Once the issues were decided, the citizens drafted detailed candidate questionnaires. As explained, the candidates' responses were posted on the Compact's Web site and used by the editorial boards of the papers in their candidate endorsement interviews. At several junctures during the process, the citizens met with the candidates to discuss their views.

There are three main points to think about in any plan that includes citizen issue forums. (1) Citizen forums are expensive and require extensive management to succeed. The Compact forums were paid for in part by a foundation grant, The Annenberg School, The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Daily News. (2) The forums should represent all geographic areas of the community. The process has to pass a nonpartisan "political smell test" or the candidates and media won't buy it. (3) The process is as important as the results.

Don't expect coverage of the process itself, but there will be extensive coverage of the results. Remember, local media (sometimes even the candidates themselves) will most likely attend the forums that will shape their understanding of the community's concerns and provide them with insights and background for more issues-based coverage of the campaign.

The Compact also sponsored several public opinion surveys conducted by The Annenberg School. The purpose of the surveys was to test the accuracy of the citizen deliberations and reinforce with candidates and the media that Philadelphians expected them to focus on substance, not scandal.

Working With the Media

Perhaps the biggest complaint about campaign coverage is the tendency of the press to focus on the horse race aspect of an election, putting too much emphasis on insider strategies instead of in-depth issues-based coverage.

Horse race coverage, by itself, does not provide citizens with enough information to make informed decisions. The vast weight of public opinion research shows that citizens prefer news and information that explain how issues affect their own daily lives, and the candidates' stands on those issues. Sadly, given the reality of budgets and deadlines, most newspapers and broadcast stations are understaffed and overworked. Reporters have little time to seek out quality research and editors have even less time to attempt innovative or engaging approaches to campaign coverage.

Fortunately, this state of affairs creates a golden opportunity for local civic groups to help improve the quality of campaign coverage. That is why the Compact focused so much energy and so many resources on the citizen forums. The Compact's plan was to offer the media ample data and information about citizen views in the hope that the media would then cover the campaign through the lens of citizen concerns. On a more practical level, the Compact offered the data and information in exchange for media agreements to become partners on the

project.

Several months before the official kickoff of the project, the Leadership Group convened an off-the-record meeting of all the local television and print media to ask if they would be interested in helping convene the citizen forums and jointly host a series of candidate roundtables and debates. The Compact offered two incentives. Those who partnered would receive detailed assessments of the citizen forums prepared by the facilitators; they would also receive two "how to" media training seminars for political reporters on ad watches and what to look for to determine the accuracy of candidate polls. Compact leaders knew that if one media outlet accepted they all would for fear of being "scooped" by the competition.

It was an easy sell. The local media (print and broadcast) were interested in the Compact's proposal and all but one local television station agreed to some form of partnership with the project. Both major newspapers partnered in hosting the citizen issue forums and both ran several special supplements featuring detailed descriptions of the issues identified by the citizens. One paper dedicated six days of editorials in the final days of the campaign covering the six issues identified by the citizens. One of the broadcast partners ran a special series about the forums several weeks prior to election day and several televised candidate debates featuring citizen participants asking questions.

Candidate Debates -- The Power of Numbers

Debates are one of the best ways for citizens to learn about political candidates. Researchers discovered a long time ago that the most effective way citizens learn and retain political information is by viewing side-by-side comparisons, whether in the form of broadcast commercials, printed mailers or live debates. There can never be too many debates. They focus the media on issues of concern to various constituencies in the city, and force the candidates to think through their positions. Given this, it is astounding how few organizations sponsor debates. They are simple, cheap, attention grabbing and educational, yet typically less than a handful of organizations host them. Those who do -- the local League of Women Voters, Action News!, the Chamber of Commerce -- often go through the same motions, feature the same formats and promote them to the same people year after year. For some unknown reason, it never occurs to the hundreds of other organizations in the community that they too can host a candidate debate, and chances are good the candidates will actually participate!

The Philadelphia Compact set out to create as many opportunities as possible for the candidates to debate. It hosted several of its own debates (and ran a series of ads in the local papers leading up to the debate), worked with its media partners to televise several debates, and the Leadership Group sent letters to their individual constituency organizations calling on them to sponsor debates and candidate forums. By the candidates' own count, they participated in at least 28 debates, up from a total of six in the last mayoral election. Debates were hosted by colleges, local associations, churches, high schools, ethnic organizations, business groups, labor unions, good government groups, health organizations, and television, radio and print media.

The final debate sponsored by the Compact was a blending of all elements of

the project. It was televised by one of the local broadcast partners and covered by the print partners. Members of the Leadership Group were in attendance and the candidates were asked questions exclusively by the hard-working individuals who had participated in the citizen forums. Fifteen citizen representatives were elected by the group to ask a series of detailed questions about their six issues of concern.

Can Citizen Efforts Make a Difference?

The Philadelphia Compact set out to establish the tone of the mayoral campaign by defining expectations and reinforcing good campaign behavior. Was it successful?

Although the definitive report on the quality of news-coverage of the campaign will not be complete until after publication of this article, there is reason to believe the quality of coverage increased dramatically over the 1995 and 1991 elections. The local newspapers dedicated an extensive amount of space to the campaign, the television stations broadcast several debates and even The New York Times wrote a story describing the unique civility of the campaign.

There is absolutely no doubt that the citizen forums had an effect on which issues the media covered and candidates addressed during the campaign. The main issues discussed were the very issues spotlighted by the citizen forums.

If the Compact was successful, its success can be attributed to three factors:

- * First, the Compact had a detailed plan.
- * Second, the Compact forged partnerships with key actors in the electoral process (the media, community leaders, etc.).
- * Third, people who managed the Compact, specifically Jessica Davis, a graduate student at The Anneberg School, worked countless hours, benefiting from the leadership of Kathleen Hall-Jamieson, the Dean of The Anneberg School, and Rosemarie Greco, the Chair of the Leadership Group. They literally created a shadow campaign that unfolded in the midst of the actual mayoral race.

Even when the assessments are complete they will never tell the whole story of the success of the Compact. Perhaps most telling is an incident that occurred during one of the debates. The crowd was particularly demanding and even rude that night to the Republican candidate, Sam Katz. John Street, the Democratic nominee, came to Katz's defense and chastised the audience for their behavior. After the debate, instead of the customary handshake, the two candidates hugged. Imagine the scene if you can. A Democrat and a Republican, a white man and an African American, hugging each other while locked in the heat of the most important election in Philadelphia's modern history.

On election day, John Street won the election by less than 8,000 votes. The Annenberg School estimates turnout was over 50 percent of eligible voters, up from 41 percent in 1991 the last competitive mayoral race.

National attention has focused on what city council member, and son of a former mayor, Frank Rizzo Jr. has called a "quality" campaign. Respected

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Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne pointed out just days after the election that both Street and Katz "ran substance-heavy campaigns" and concluded that because the campaign was run on a high plain "the new mayor has an opportunity to be the conciliator who extends the lease practical innovators now hold on city politics all over the country."

The Philadelphia story shows that citizens can make a difference. It was an experiment that can be easily replicated throughout the nation, improved upon and used to make our political campaigns a little better. And for that, it is a story worth telling.

Civic Organizations that sponsor and arrange local issues forums

Civic Engagement Organizations

America Speaks

www.americaspeaks.org

Phone: (202) 667-3382

The Harwood Institute

www.theharwoodinstitute.org

Phone: (301) 656-3669

The League of Women Voters

www.lwv.org

Phone: (202) 429-1965

Study Circles Resource Center

www.studycircles.com

Phone: (860) 928-2616

The Horses, Handlers, Wagers and Payoffs

	John Street (Dem)	Sam Katz (GOP)
Media	Axelrod & Associates	The Campaign Group
Pollster	Ron Lester & Associates	The McLaughlin Group
Mail	Strategy Group	
Votes	50%	49%

GRAPHIC: Picture 1, no caption; Picture 2, Katz; Picture 3, Street

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BYLINE: J. Dionne Jr.

BODY:

As if parents didn't have enough to worry about already, consider the Civics Crisis. It's real. The results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, released earlier this month, found that one-third of high school seniors lacked a basic grasp of the principles of American government and that fully three-quarters were not proficient in civics.

Oh no, you say: Not another study showing our students aren't learning. Don't we have enough trouble just teaching kids to read, write and count? Can't civics wait?

In fact, civics is in the waiting room now, and that ought to be a national scandal. When the country began establishing public schools in the last century, the whole idea was that freedom depended on an educated citizenry. Civics wasn't an add-on. It was the whole point.

As the Project on Civic Education at the University of Texas noted in a recent report, more than a quarter of the states have provisions in their constitutions declaring in one form or another that "a system of public instruction is required because an informed and capable citizenry is vital to the preservation of a free and democratic government." But whatever the public documents say, few people talk about the schools in these terms anymore.

"Schools in many ways have lost their civic souls," says Terry Pickeral of the Denver-based Education Commission of the States. Pickeral was speaking at a conference organized here last week by the University of Maryland. It brought together educators and civic activists who think civic education should be reformed and pushed nearer the top of school priorities.

As often happens when a problem finally begins to penetrate the national consciousness, solutions are already emerging in communities around the country.

The North Carolina Civics Education Consortium, for example, has created an alliance of community and business leaders, educators and politicians to turn the teaching of civics into something more than desultory classes on how a bill becomes a law. Some of us actually think that subject still matters, but civics

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education needs to do more to engage students. The North Carolina project puts community leaders into the schools and draws students into the public issues of their communities.

Service learning programs, which encourage or require students to volunteer in community projects as part of their education, are on the rise all over the country, a good civic sign. But Pickeral argues that to have a real civic kick, service learning needs to be linked to teaching about public life and government.

The National Conference of State Legislatures, alarmed by the low esteem in which legislative politicians are held, is launching its own program to teach the merits of representative democracy.

Karl Kurtz, who directs the NCSL project, notes that some of the cynicism directed at public life is rooted in a view that partisanship is never about genuine differences and that most political acts involve "unprincipled deal-making and needless conflict."

These are not unknown in politics, but they are not the whole story. "The process is contentious," Kurtz says, "because it encompasses different and competing values, interests and constituencies, all of which are making claims on government or one another." Democratic government is about settling these conflicts through means short of violence--meaning argument, negotiation, voting and, sometimes, compromise. NCSL plans to pick a day when legislators from all over the country will visit schools in their districts to carry this message.

While they're there, teachers might give them an earful. Kenneth Tolo of the University of Texas project pointed out that half of civics teachers find existing textbooks inadequate and that supplementary materials are more exciting to students. But as Carole Hahn of Emory University noted, state policies often restrict what materials teachers can use in civics courses, and teachers are frequently encouraged to avoid controversial issues--the stuff of civic and political life--rather than engage them.

For anything to change in civics education, adults will have to care about the matter--and it's not clear in this cynical time that many of us do. "When students in the world's most powerful democracy cannot see the value of representative government," the St. Louis Post-Dispatch editorialized on the recent civics test results, "we need to rethink the culture we have created." Civic education feeds a more civically engaged culture. But a culture of civic disengagement may get the civics education it deserves.

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