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Targeted Over Charter Stance

Perkins Sees Union-Backed Win As Repudiation of Foes

By DAVID SIMS

Embarking on a tour of polling sites on primary day Sept. 14 with a team of District Council 37 supporters, State Sen. Bill Perkins huddled the workers around him for a photo opportunity, donning a green union shirt in solidarity even though it clashed with his crisp suit.

"It's not a fashion statement, it's a political statement," he declared. Later that day, he said that the support of unions like DC 37 and the United Federation of Teachers had been vital in his landslide victory over charter school proponent Basil Smikle, who had the backing of the education reform movement, the city's editorial boards, and Governor Paterson.

A Staunch Charter Critic

Mr. Perkins's race had been pitched by the media as one of the toughest for an incumbent in the State Senate, as he represents Harlem, a neighborhood with one of the highest concentrations of charter schools in the state. He has been publicly critical of charters, voting against raising the statewide cap on them and holding oversight hearings highlighting their negative impacts on communities.

Mr. Smikle, a political strategist who worked for Bill Clinton and Mayor Bloomberg, emphasized his support for charter schools in his campaign and won endorsements and glowing coverage from the Daily News and New York Post, as well as the backing of Manhattan Democratic Chairman and Assemblyman Keith Wright's

Harlem political club. The Governor, who held the Senate seat before Mr. Perkins, did not officially endorse Mr. Smikle but stumped with him in Harlem a week before the election.

None of these factors, however, prevented Mr. Perkins from trouncing Mr. Smikle with 76 percent of the vote, getting 17,357 votes to his 5,389. The hefty margin of victory seemed to surprise even the Perkins staff, which was at best cautiously optimistic during the campaign. Interviewed at his victory party, Mr. Perkins seemed tired and relieved by the result.

'Tight' Race a Media Creation

"I think the media was very careless in terms of suggesting that this was a more-vulnerable race than in fact was the case," he said. "They wanted to cheerlead, hoping that in doing so, by virtue of their exaggeration, that they would create something that wasn't there. In some respects they did."

The hype around Mr. Smikle, as well as other candidates like Mark Pollard, who ran a similar campaign against Velmanette Montgomery in Brooklyn and was also defeated soundly, contributed to a general fear of criticizing the "education reform" movement, Mr. Perkins said.

"The hedge-fund millionaires were attempting to send a message, loud and clear, that if you don't obey, you will pay, with Perkins as the example," he said. "I think they were also

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Perkins's Union-Backed Win

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saying, especially to labor, particularly the UFT, that in terms of Albany, they were the new game in town.

'Hedge-Funders Bullied Us'

"The UFT obviously were not prepared to accept that, and through me they decided that they could prove it, and it looks like they have," he continued.

"This is a significant defeat for [the hedge-funders] from that point of view, but nevertheless, I think they said, 'Whether he wins or not, you don't want to go through this... if you want to enjoy your summer, if you don't want to be unfairly demonized, don't be like that.' They bullied us, they were the kids that were the bullies in the schoolyard."

Mr. Perkins charged that most of Mr. Smikle's financial donations had come from out of the district, and in many cases from out of the state. "He has a substantial amount of hedge-fund money coming out of Connecticut," he said while visiting polling sites earlier that day in Harlem.

His challenger, campaigning outside of P.S. 163 on the Upper West Side, dismissed the claims as irrelevant. "Anyone running for office gets money where they can get it," Mr. Smikle said. "Seventy percent of my contributions are under \$250; 80 percent of his are from special interests. He's going to have more money, he's an incumbent, so what's he concerned about? He's getting money from everywhere."

'Parents Don't Care About This'

He said that his had been a grassroots campaign, built on door-knocking and community outreach. "Frankly, when you talk to a parent, she doesn't care where I get my money from. She wants her child to do well in school, that's the bottom line," he said.

He noted that while the issue of school choice was a keystone of his platform, he focused more on the toxic environment in Albany, casting Mr. Perkins, who was first elected to the State Senate in 2006, as an entrenched incumbent. "People want change, they want more responsive government in Albany and they like what I have to say about that," Mr.

democratic process. They decide, 'we went through the process, then we'll do what we want,' he said. "It's the pattern and the curse of mayoral control."

He added, "The media has bought into [the DOE's] rhetoric, and I think it has done a disservice to the people in terms of really getting clear about what's going on. Labor's involvement is important in terms of helping the working families to understand exactly what's going on."

In the Alice Kornegay Houses in East Harlem, he came across a locked door that was preventing people from getting into the polling site.

Using tape and a doorstop, he quickly improvised to keep the door from closing again. "I get nervous when people can't vote," he chided the Board of Elections workers at the site. "Do you know how many people didn't vote because of that? I can't have that! I'm paranoid!"

There really were people after Mr. Perkins, but in light of his victory, the paranoia may have been overblown.



The Chief-Leader/Andrew Hinderaker

LEAN ON ME: State Sen. Bill Perkins (right) counted on the support of District Council 37 Executive Director Lillian Roberts on primary day Sept. 14, campaigning with her in his Harlem district. 'He's very important,' Ms. Roberts said. 'Anybody that stands for the same things that we do, and supports the community the way he does, he deserves our support, and this is the time we can show that we appreciate him.'