

POLITICS

Working Families Party Soares

WITH THE ELECTION just a few weeks away, the Working Families Party has a major target in the crosshairs: Albany's district attorney office. If its candidate, David Soares, wins, it will be the third major victory for the party—after the 2003 success of City Council candidate Leticia James and the legislative passage of a minimum wage hike in Albany.

"They're probably the most traditional campaigners," says Soares. "In the things they stand for and the things that they fight for, they are really in sync with my own personal philosophy. It was just a very perfect blend."

The upstart party knocked the state capital's Democratic machine on its heels last month when Soares beat incumbent Paul Clyne 14,030 to 8,684 in the Democratic primary.

Soares' intense grassroots campaign had the

candidate still pounding the pavement for votes the day of the primary, and driving in a 10-car caravan complete with bullhorns. Leading up to the election, an extensive coalition of groups ranging from the Empire State Pride Agenda to Citizen Action enlisted 1,000 volunteers to con-

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tact 20,000 voters. But effective voter mobilization, a growing hallmark of WFP campaigns, wasn't the only ingredient for success. Soares campaigned heavily on a compelling issue: overhauling the state's Rockefeller drug laws.

Clyne has been a vocal opponent of drug

law reform. Though the D.A. holds no direct power over state laws, the New York State District Attorneys Association—of which Clyne is a vice-president—has been the only organized opposition to reform. The soul of Soares' campaign, in contrast, was revising the laws, particularly mandatory minimum sentences for drug convictions.

Even the Working Families Party was surprised by the pull of the drug law issue. "We were amazed how much people already knew about the Rockefeller drug laws, and how strongly people felt about it," says WFP spokesperson Alex Navarro. "They got the message, and they cared enough to vote out an incumbent who was fairly popular."

The issue garnered significant support from quarters as disparate as the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA), a George Soros-backed drug policy reform group that contributed over \$80,000 to the campaign, and former Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill, who chipped in \$2,000.

Soares drew criticism for accepting funds from the DPA, which Clyne supporters lambasted as a drug-legalization group.

Albany democrats were so riled up about the race that a handful of Clyne supporters, including County Democratic Chair Betty Barnette, filed an eleventh-hour lawsuit seeking to bar the Working Families Party from campaigning on behalf of its candidate in his bid for the Democratic nomination. But once Soares won the primary—openly vowing to turn Albany County into an example of drug law reform—the county's Dems lined up behind the candidate, and Barnette dropped the suit.

The intrigue continued, with political tongues wagging over Clyne's next move. Some observers thought he might switch parties and run as a Republican if Roger Cusick, the Republican nominee, stepped aside. At press time, however, that prospect was waning as the Republicans began to campaign in earnest for Cusick.

It's hard to say what kind of fight Cusick or Clyne will put up for November. In the wake of his defeat, Clyne estimated he'd need \$500,000 to mount an effective campaign against Soares—quintuple the amount he spent on the primary. While the WFP continues to rally around Soares, the fact that Albany County's Democrats outnumber Republicans nearly 2 to 1 offers some comfort—though Soares isn't taking any chances. "A lot of the traditionalists will say, 'Don't worry, you won the primary, you won the election,'" he says. "But I'm going to continue doing exactly what I did in the primary: work like a dog."
—Tracie McMillan

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