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Retail politics not what they once were in NH

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 4, 2012

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, center, speaks to supporters during a campaign stop at the Stage Restaurant in Keene, N.H., Dec. 21, 2011. (AP/Matthew Cavanaugh)

MANCHESTER, N.H. -- The old, red-brick mills of Manchester line the entire eastern bank of the Merrimack River, but no textiles or shoes are made there these days. Now, technology companies, Jillian?s Billiards Club, Milly?s Tavern, and the local campus of the University of New Hampshire fill the rooms that once held looms and shoemaking equipment. And, this year, with the political calendar moved forward so that the New Hampshire primary occurs only two weeks after Christmas, it is not only the mills that have changed.

At the first intersection, there are dozens of campaign signs for Romney, Huntsman, Gingrich and Perry. But, at the second intersection, a man dressed in a Santa suit waves a sign advertising a local furniture store?s Christmas sales. The confluence of the campaign with St. Nick has created a great conundrum for the candidates in this year?s Republican Party primary: They are not only competing with each other for the voters? attention, they are competing with Santa.

?Our outreach [to voters] will be continuing,? Kate Schackai, Ron Paul?s press secretary, said when asked about what campaign activities planned over the Christmas holiday. ?But we don?t want to annoy people who are trying to enjoy the holiday.?

The holiday schedule was not the only change. New Hampshire is known as the state where old-style retail campaigning is still important, where showing up at spaghetti dinners, meeting with the Rotary Club, and interacting with voters at diners can help galvanize a campaign as effectively as television ads or Facebook. But retail politics are not what they once were.

In Keene, a small city of 23,409 residents best-known for its annual Pumpkin Festival, Mitt Romney is holding what was advertised as a ?meeting with voters? at The Stage Restaurant on the city?s central square Dec. 21. The restaurant?s name seemed propitious: The scene outside is from central casting. Next door to the restaurant is a white clapboard church, and both face a square with a gazebo, a Civil War memorial and a large Christmas tree. The square is lined with fancy and not-so-fancy shops. Everyone is bundled up against the cold. The blue-and-white Romney campaign bus -- ?Conservative, Businessman, Leader? reads the sign on the bus -- and the bright yellow bus for the press corps cause only the slightest disruption in the flow of traffic. All that is missing

is the snow, and not even the most well-tuned campaign can control that.

Inside The Stage, however, fully two-thirds of the crowd consists of the traveling press corps, with television cameras, klieg lights and microphones in tow. The other third are people who are already Romney supporters. There is no evidence of any diners, indeed, there is no evidence of any food or libations except for three half-empty Starbucks containers on the bar.

U.S. Sens. Judd Gregg and Kelly Ayotte mill about, talking with fellow supporters and with the press. ?There is enthusiasm,? Ayotte tells a group of us as we scribble her words on our pads. Two young boys sitting behind her, Jacob, age 8 and Tommy, 10, do not look overly enthusiastic, although their countenances brighten when the candidate comes by and says, ?Can I get a picture with these guys?? Their mother obliges and Romney moves on. He is not as plastic as he is often portrayed, although when one woman starts to invite him to her town?s GOP fundraiser, while his mouth says, ?I would love to,? his eyes have already moved over the woman?s shoulder to see who is next in line. The woman realizes she no longer has Romney?s attention and her face goes blank.

The real enthusiasm is outside on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. Two Ron Paul supporters hold handmade signs: One reads, ?End the Drug War,? and the other states, ?End Prohibition? with a marijuana leaf symbol. One of the two men explains his support for Paul this way: ?I kinda look at ... he?s the only hope this country has. ... There?s gonna be imminent failure if anyone else gets elected.? The other Paul supporter says he has not voted for a major party candidate in 20 years, backing Libertarian candidate Bob Barr in 2008. A few minutes of conversation with the two men reveals that the issue of legalizing marijuana is not, for them, what you would call an abstract concern.

The Romney event kicked off a three-day bus tour by the candidate through a string of picturesque towns where similar events would be held. Those events would also be staged for the cameras: Rural enclaves like Keene no longer dominate New Hampshire elections. The southeastern corner of the state has become an exurb for Boston, and the fast-growing towns along the Massachusetts border contain most of the state?s voters who, like all suburbanites, are reached primarily via television ads. But at least Romney?s advance staff knew enough to find scenic backdrops for their candidate. There might or might not be any real voters to engage, but the pictures shout ?New Hampshire.?

Not so the campaign of Newt Gingrich. The former speaker was holding a ?town meeting? in downtown Manchester in the afternoon and the staff had selected a ballroom in a Radisson Hotel for the event. The room looked like every other ballroom in a midsize chain hotel in a midsize city. It could have been in Kansas.

Outside the hotel, protesters stood in the rain carrying signs that read ?TARP Recipients Love Newt? and ?Divorce Lawyers for Newt.? I ask them whom they are really supporting and one woman responds, ?We?re for Newt! Hardcore! Out here in the rain.? I ask the others and they, too, decline to identify which candidate they are supporting. But one sign gives the game away. It reads ?Thanks 4 Voting 4 Amnesty,? a reference to Gingrich?s ever-so-slight deviation from current GOP orthodoxy that demands all undocumented workers get deported. Romney?s campaign has been running to the right of Gingrich on this issue, so the protesters were likely sent by the Romney campaign.

Inside the hotel, the people gathered to listen to Gingrich is mostly an older crowd. Frank is 68 years old and has driven down from New Hampshire?s Lakes Region with his wife, Jean, to hear the former speaker. He is already supporting Gingrich. ?He?s got the most knowledge,? Frank tells me. ?He has the most direct answers. He has the most easy-to-understand plan.? Then, after asking me again which newspaper I write for, Frank concludes he should address the issue of Gingrich?s personal life. ?I believe him sincerely. He stood in front of me and said he?d asked God for forgiveness. None of us is perfect except Jesus.?

Frank and Jean are the kind of true-red, tea party conservatives whom Gingrich needs to hold on to if he hopes to win. When I ask them about Ayotte, who beat a tea party candidate to win the GOP nomination last year, Jean says, ?She?s too moderate for me.? Frank adds, ?Her [Ayotte] and [former New Hampshire Gov. John] Sununu, if they?re together I put them in the category of the establishment.? This last word is spoken as if it were a swear word.

Frank is also volunteering for the Gingrich campaign. He says he makes about 30 phone calls a day on the candidate?s behalf. This does not require a trip to campaign headquarters. Frank pulls up a call list on his computer and can make the calls from home, entering the information he elicits on the computer so that the Gingrich campaign staff has voter information that is constantly being updated.

Sitting behind Frank and Jean is Paul Jost, a 57-year-old real estate developer from Florida who has come to New Hampshire ?to be part of the process.? Jost tells me, ?I am leaning towards Huntsman but I haven?t completely made up my mind.? He attended the debate Jon Huntsman and Gingrich had recently and had previously attended one of Huntsman?s town meetings. He acknowledges that Huntsman is a long shot, but adds, ?Nobody thought Newt had a chance a month ago.?

Unlike a Romney town hall meeting, Gingrich actually does take questions at his event, but only after dishing up large servings of red meat. He calls President Barack Obama a ?Saul Alinksy radical? and asserts that between himself and the incumbent, ?the gap, philosophically, is enormous.? He calls Obama ?the finest food stamp president in history.? When the questions begin, he uses almost every answer to trash ?the elite media,? frequently calling out *The New York Times* for special derision. Katherine Seelye, the *Times* reporter covering Gingrich, sits two rows in front of me and smiles. Gingrich is nimble in his responses as well as pointed in his criticisms of Obama, liberals and the media, and the crowd eats it up. After four questions, he thanks everyone for coming and is surrounded by adoring fans.

Direct candidate-to-voter outreach is only part of a campaign. Phone banks, lawn signs and television advertising are just as important. And you can tell a lot about each campaign by assessing how it approaches these tasks. For example, Frank said he was calling for Gingrich from home, downloading a list of voters on his computer. At Paul?s headquarters in New Hampshire, there are plenty of tech-savvy young people, and supporters can also make calls from home, but there is also a large room with long tables and 22 phones. ?Unlike some campaigns, we built the infrastructure,? Schackai says. ?We take a traditional approach to campaigning.? They like to have supporters congregate at the central office to make calls, building a sense of camaraderie.

When you cross from Massachusetts into New Hampshire, the lawn signs begin. In the first few miles, some homes have signs for Romney, others for Paul, and others for Gingrich. There are lots of Rick Perry signs, but they are all placed at intersections or along otherwise barren stretches of road. Such signage may help acquire name recognition for local candidates, but only a sign placed on a lawn signifies to other residents that the owner of the lawn is supporting a given candidate. ?I live in a small town and people know me, and I have signs

on my lawn,? Schackai says. ?I get stopped at the supermarket all the time.?

?There haven?t been a lot of television ads,? says Dani, a young woman tending bar at J.W. Hills Sports Bar & Grille in Manchester. ?Honestly, I wouldn?t pay attention if there were. I don?t want to hear it.? She tells me that Gingrich did come in for lunch and that he seemed like a ?kind man,? but she clearly is not paying much attention to the campaign and says her customers are not either.

Of course, the Iowa caucuses precede the New Hampshire primary by a week, and the results from the Hawkeye State can scramble the field in the Granite State. In 2004, Sen. John Kerry was running in fourth in New Hampshire polls, but after his surprise victory in Iowa and the implosion of Gov. Howard Dean?s campaign, Kerry rolled to an easy victory here. Conversely, in 2008, New Hampshirites refused to jump on the Obama bandwagon and then-Sen. Hillary Clinton won a narrow victory.

This year, the GOP race has been exceedingly fluid, with different candidates rising and falling as Republican voters went from one ?flavor of the month? to another, embracing Michele Bachmann, then Perry, then Herman Cain, then Gingrich. Each of the candidates has displayed a certain aptitude for self-inflicted mistakes, and there are still three weeks to go. I asked state Rep. Duane Erickson from Nashua if he wanted to guess who would win the coveted prize in New Hampshire. ?Any predictions?? he said with a mischievous grin. ?Snow on Friday.?

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

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