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How W.Va. Democrats Came to Terms with Obama's Rise

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WHEELING, W.Va. -- In June 2008, this small steel town, tucked between the swing states of Ohio and Pennsylvania, was grappling with the local consequences of Sen. Barack Obama's historic victory in locking up the Democratic presidential nomination.

Almost as soon as Obama locked up the Democratic presidential nomination, the order came from Washington to merge the operations of the Democratic Party and the Obama campaign from the top down to the local level.

The predominately elderly, white organizers who have run the county Democratic Party here for a generation were uneasy about integrating their operation with the Democratic presidential campaign, which was filled with new, unknown faces, many of them minorities.

I first visited Wheeling in June 2008 in the midst of the resident Democrats' debate over whether or not to merge camps, and returned in October to see how race had impacted presidential politics just weeks before Election Day. West Virginia remains up for grabs politically, with Obama and Republican Sen. John McCain battling to prevail here.

Back in June, if you asked longtime Democratic activist Waneta Acker what she thought about merging the Obama campaign with her party's local operations, she'd just strain her neck and tense up.

For the past two decades, this 88-year-old retired insurance saleswoman has run the

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one-room Democratic headquarters downtown.

She collected \$600 per month to rent the space, set up the phone bank, and organize the candidates' promotional material on a table: local commissioner here, prosecuting attorney there, state assessor here, President of the United States there.

From morning to night Acker held court. Factory workers, union representatives, and retirees came by to snatch buttons and talk politics. You'll all get healthcare, she assured them.

Democrats in this 50,000-person county knew Acker. And Acker knew her Democrats. Or so she thought.

Change suddenly arrived on April 12. That day, at the nearby Carpenters Union, supporters of Barack Obama staged a coup of sorts.

It was the Ohio County Democratic Party's monthly meeting. On the agenda: choosing delegates for the state Democratic Convention in Charleston, which in turn would elect delegates to the National Convention in Denver.

In place of the dozen or so participants Acker expected, at least 50 Barack Obama devotees showed up, clad in blue T-shirts, baseball caps, and buttons blaring: "PROGRESS."

"Who are these people?!" Acker demanded. She didn't know them, "And that's unusual because I know gillions of people."

Stranger still, they were "mostly dark, black, African American or what have you." That's through Acker's eyes. In fact, less than one in three of those Obama-backers were black, though that is still a relatively large ratio in this 93 percent white town. To Acker, anyway, it looked like a flood of strange newcomers.

Over her 60 years of political life, "[Black people] never got involved [in politics] never, and they didn't help us, even on our Democratic Headquarters," she said. Then all of a sudden, they came en masse.

Acker stood firm. Politics was in her blood, she said, and her blood was still pumping. Recovering from a May mastectomy, she settled into her maroon recliner and began

dialing her contacts. "I'm like a phone book."

With friends and acquaintances, she discussed their concerns.

"Race is one issue," she said then. "That's the biggest issue."

Acker feared "retaliation" for ancestral sins. "Black people were treated horrible in the past and might start showing the white people what it's like," Acker mused. Maybe they'll "get cocky" if Obama wins.

Even if he didn't win, she feared that Obama's candidacy could hurt local Democratic candidates. If the headquarters is covered in Obama paraphernalia, Acker wondered, "How many white people will come in the office? That's what I'm looking forward to [seeing]."

If the Obama campaign and the Democratic headquarters merged, Acker worried, maybe Obama supporters wouldn't work hard for their local Democrats. Maybe they wouldn't pay their dues. Maybe they'd try to oust her.

She wagged a finger. "They're not going to rule me! If they think they are going to come in there and push me around, no way. No way!"

Back in June, some Obama supporters were anxious too. Aaron Wilkinson, a divorced 25-year-old with a black father and white mother lives just a few blocks from Acker. Wilkinson was the first African American student president of West Liberty State College. Now he sells shoes in the morning, volunteers for local Democratic candidates in the afternoon, and plots politics by night.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there's people that work for the Democratic Committee in West Virginia that are not too thrilled that there's an African-American running for president" he said.

If the Democratic Headquarters and the Obama Campaign merge, Wilkinson wondered, couldn't some disgruntled white party officials try to "tear it [the Obama efforts] apart from the inside?" Or, at least, ignore Obama and focus entirely on the local races?

Since Obama has the money, Wilkinson's advice was to keep the two separate.

Thousands of Obama supporters and local Democratic parties across the country were confronting similar situations. Their choices would have the greatest impact in places where Obama had lost big to Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) places like West Virginia.

Ohio County gave Obama only 36 percent of the Democratic vote, with similar percentages in Pennsylvania, 11 miles east of Wheeling, and Ohio, 1,100 feet west.

A few white Democratic leaders like John Saunders were quick to back Obama after Clinton's loss, but faced a challenge persuading party elders like Acker. Saunders is the Ohio County Democratic Party Co-Chair, the president of the United Steelworkers of America Local 1238, and, as listeners of his weekly radio program call him, the "Big Dawg."

When he's bored, he lets one eye droop shut while keeping the other one open extra wide to remind you he's awake, waiting.

Saunders thought that Obama volunteers could reinvigorate his aging Democratic Executive Committee. But sitting across from Acker in June, he recognized that old-timers were struggling with their fears and suspicions. He tried to reassure her.

Eyeing Acker across her living room, he asserted, "We are going to invite Obama's people into the traditional party in this county." The camps will merge, he said. "I'm going to force it. It's the only way you got a shot of bringing this party together and a chance to win."

Acker consented. "That's right. That's right." She couldn't stomach the idea of another Republican in the White House so she began calling her friends on behalf of Obama. "We don't have much choice," she said.

"We got him [Obama]. He was nominated. We have to accept it."

She leaned forward, earnestly. "We have to accept it."

FAST-FORWARD FIVE MONTHS to October, and it feels like five decades have passed.

On Sept. 2 the Obama Campaign and the local Democratic Headquarters cut the tape

together inaugurating the joint "Democratic Headquarters for Change."

Acker dates the beginning of the two camps' integration to July 24, the opening of the Italian Festival on the waterfront. She was busy setting up the Democratic Party booth when some of the Obama newbies approached her and offered their help passing out local politicians' fliers and registering voters.

"I didn't know them from a load of coal," she remembers, "But they knew what they were doing" with their forms, their talk of health care and their relentlessness. "Just talking to them, I saw what nice people they were."

Next came the Stern Wheel Regatta, then Waterfront Wednesdays, then Party Picnics and so on. Setting her palms apart in the air and marching them together, Acker says, "Little by little we came together."

There were compromises. Acker agreed to let the Obama folks take over the phone banking. "We only had one phone," she explains. Acker took charge distributing party literature to the Democratic faithful. The Obama volunteers let her lead the sale of Obama pins, pulling in \$1,000 of the \$1,200 she normally had to raise for two months of operating costs.

And the same local white Democrats kept coming to the headquarters, despite the life-sized cutouts of Obama. "I was surprised so many of them [white Democrats] have changed," says Acker. "Where they didn't accept the fact that he was colored, now they've changed their attitude. Really."

"I also had some concern because he was colored that they [Obama volunteers] might turn the table on us here, but now when I see the way people have really worked together and banded together, I see a different way."

"It's a different era," she muses. "I accept it."

John "Big Dawg" Saunders is less sentimental. Now engaged in a union battle over 800 layoffs, he is watching the stock market in horror.

"Look, race is still an issue," blurts Saunders. "We're not nearly where we should be, but when it got to your pocket book, that became the determining factor in this race."

"For now the race issue went away," he declares, with both eyes opened wide. "Race is gone, OK?"

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