

Election

Tuesday was election day in Chicago and I woke up at 4am to work the polling stations with my girlfriend, who was working as a captain for Danny Solis in the 25th Ward. It was my first time working an election from opening to closing and it happened in Chicago in a hotly contested ward. The day was full of stories. I thought I would share some of them. I was writing into the Chicago Reader's blog called Clout City , sending periodic dispatches from the Blackberry...

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Dispatch 1:

We got to the polls at 5:15 after runs for coffee and donuts. The 25th is really going to be a contest between Danny Solis, Cahutemoc Morfin, and Martha Padilla. Medrano is out, barred by the Supreme Court and I saw one of his guys putting up signs for Morfin. Rumor is that Medrano's people will split between Morfin and working over in the 12th Ward race. The polling places are opening on time as far as I can tell. The 7th and 24th precincts will be hot, always the Pilsen precincts that get hot here.

One captain said to me, "It's all about the coffee and donuts. That's all it is." ;)

Dispatch 2:

It's 9am and the work rush is winding down at the polls. The polling places are a trip. The election judges worrying about whether there's enough decaf or donuts. Some of the places are schools and then you have the principals freaking out about their teachers' parking spaces. I witnessed one amusing sign dispute at a polling place that's split between the 2nd and 25th Wards. The building engineer was tearing down all the signs on school property and chucking them in the dumpster. A guy working for 2nd Ward candidate David Askew bristled, called the State's Attorney over, and got his signs back and put them up where they'd been. Meanwhile all the poll watchers are inside with their clipboards checking off the voters who they think have voted with them.

I noticed a few things in the morning that were interesting. First, nobody has seen the HDO candidates in the 25th Ward for the last two months. They haven't participated in any of the forums, they don't go walking, they haven't shown up in public at all. Then today, there are HDO volunteers with Daley/Del Valle signs on every corner in the Ward and their signage is all over the place. The signs are designed to look exactly like the Daley/Miguel Del Valle sign but they are for Aaron Del Valle, Al Sanchez's lieutenant who is running for alderman. The signs don't even have his first name. HDO's ground machine still works. Most people think that they are only hoping to be spoilers for Solis because of the animosity between the camps.

Medrano's people are definitely working for Morfin. He has a good showing from his people. His candidacy has been a story in good luck and hard work, and I have a feeling he will run a strong second in this election. Padilla has no street operation to speak of. Juan Soliz has a lot of guys going around in trucks and plastering signs everywhere but no reps at the polling places.

The Medrano folks are grumbling that the Supreme Court had quiet orders from somewhere to hold their decision until

late, in order to create maximum havoc in the voting process and to prevent any counter-actions. Who knows? But the Supreme Court would be pretty indignant if they heard that accusation.

The over all feel this morning is that Solis has the upper hand, that HDO is pushing its apparatus and will make a dent, and that Morfin is running hard to force a runoff.

The weather, which wasn't bad this morning very early, is getting colder and colder. Volunteers will have a hard time standing outside for long. If it snows later, the voting numbers will drop significantly.

That's the news so far in the 25th. I'll make a run around the precincts around lunch time and see what's up.

Dispatch 3:

1pm in the 25th Ward and it's very quiet. The judges are having lunch. The exit polls are showing that Solis is running in front of Morfin, who is doing well, particularly on the east side of Pilsen.

There has been a certain amount of drama about the election judges. Medrano showed up at the 4th precinct with the Trib and SunTimes to protest the fact that Alderman Solis, wife is a judge. Its not illegal though. Its a post appointed by committeemen so it's a machine thing generally, the going price a hot lunch. Election judges job is to check the voters in, so their real political use is to gauge how things are going. From what I'm hearing it will be close in Pilsen and if Morfin or one of the other candidates runs strong in any non-Pilsen neighborhood then there will be a runoff. My best guess from what I've seen is that it won't got to a runoff but these precincts have mostly only processed a hundred votes or so, and will get double that between 3-7.

Reporting from Pilsen...

Dispatch 4:

5pm and things are starting to warm up at the polls. The turnout is low at the precincts I've been to, about 150 out of 460 where I am now. It's really a two and a half horse race now. Medrano's folks are turning out for Morfin, a big help for him in the Taylor corridor and in Tony Sutter's precinct. Solis is killing Chinatown and Tri-Taylor as expected. The questions are how many votes will Padilla and Del Valle pull out, and then a race down the backstretch between Morfin and the 50 per cent mark for Solis. His people are worried but present. Morfin,s people are hopeful. Medrano's are angry and determined.

Dispatch 5:

7pm and I'm at the 21st and 26th precincts in the Tri-Taylor area of the 25th Ward. Solis won 61 per cent followed by Padilla's 18 per cent and Morfin's 11 per cent in both. Solis normally wins big at about 75per cent here so these numbers are scary for him and mean he has got to do better than usual in Pilsen and he has to have nailed Chinatown.

Everything is packed up. The 2nd Ward also polls here and Fioretti and Doody ran very close around 35 per cent followed by incumbent Haithcock, Kenny Johnson, and Askew all between 15 and 25. 715 pm and that's the news.

Last Licks:

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About 8pm I got a call from my girlfriend in Solis' headquarters. They were waiting for all the tapes to come in from the polling stations so they could calculate the numbers. They had almost everything in and Solis only recorded 48% of the vote. He needed 51% to avoid a run-off. As expected it was Morfin in second position. He rode a perfect storm into political existence. He was nobody and then SEIU gave him money and legitimacy (correction: AFSCME gave him money. SEIU went after Solis independently. But one of Temoc's supporters, Jose Arreola is SEIU's rep and the head of Casa Michoacan in Pilsen.)Â He was a pest and then Medrano turned over his street operation to him. Now he's a guy who may have forced a run-off against a powerful alderman and his name is Cahutemoc so he will be the people's champion.

By 9pm we were at the victory party and things were not feeling victorious for those who knew but the news was reporting a victory, with Solis winning around 54%. They didn't know. Their numbers were partial and not as good as ours and we didn't know, so they were just going with the flow.

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As it turned out the numbers, as of 1pm on Wednesday have not come in for the final precinct. It's close. Solis has 50.3% and the final precinct is said to be a favorable Chinatown precinct. Rumor says Morfin is asking for a re-count.

It made me realize that the final hour of polling, when we actually drove to people's homes and roused them out, may have been the difference. All the captains cashing in their chits. You have to talk to people. What if the swing is 25 votes, as it may end up being?

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All Politics is Local: Lessons from the Polls

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1) Signs don't matter: Aaron Del Valle wall-papered the ward and won only 4% of the vote.

2) Precinct Captains do: Medrano's captains on the west side of Pilsen actually won precincts for Morfin in an area where he has no base and no history and where Solis has close allies.

3) Work from start to finish: We probably got, at our precinct, ten extra votes out of the last hour because we hustled for

them. If everyone did that we're talking a hundred votes or so, which in this election could have decided the run-off.

4) Remember the last election well, burn it in your mind: Candidates forget what happened the last time, especially if they win. You can't do that.

5) Start running early: Temoc Morfin declared first and started working first and it paid off for him in terms of earning name recognition, legitimacy, and personal support.

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If you would like to follow the money trails you can check them out at Aldertrack.com and at the Illinois Board of Election site . Be careful though, because some people don't report what they have. In fact no one really does.Â