

**A Birthday Tribute to  
John Turner  
September 29, 1997**

The people in this room by definition think they know a lot about John Turner.

But I am going to tell you something about John that I bet most of you never heard of. That is how he once designed an election campaign.

The year was 1961. Our Political Science colleague Art Naftalin had returned to the Department after six years as Commissioner of Administration for the State of Minnesota under Governor Orville Freeman, who was beaten in 1960.

But Naftalin, having tasted power, could not be satisfied having only the power to grade undergraduates. So he decided to run for mayor. The incumbent was P. Kenneth Peterson, a two-term Republican. It may seem strange that Republicans were once mayors of Minneapolis, but in those days the names on the ballot were not party-designated, so unless voters were informed by some means who was the real Democrat, they were often fooled into voting for someone they probably wouldn't have chosen if they had more information.

The other well-known Democrat who wanted to be mayor was David Roe, a vigorous young building and construction trades union leader.

Organized labor in Minneapolis claimed that when Humphrey left the mayorship for the U.S. Senate in 1948, the agreement was that the academic liberals could have the nominations for state office but that they would leave the local politics to Labor. So when Naftalin decided to run for mayor, Labor was plenty made, and vowed to do anything they could to defeat him. This was indeed the most likely outcome.

The Democrat-Farmer-Labor party was an unlikely coalition of farmers (who are small businessmen and hate Big Labor), organized labor leaders (who suspect academics), old-fashioned Democrats (who were conservative Catholics who had never liked Prohibition), and liberals (whom none of the other liked, and who didn't like the others all that well themselves).

The DFL city convention was deadlocked between Art and Dave. Art had a slight lead, but couldn't get the 60 percent required for endorsement. Naftalin was endorsed by several DFL ward organizations. Roe got the endorsement of the United Labor Committee and Teamsters.

Peterson's and Roe's campaigns were run by what I call "wise old ward leaders." Their strategy was to work in their strongest areas – to go hunting where the ducks are. Therefore, the Peterson Republicans would work the Republican areas in an undifferentiated general way. And the Roe people would work the Democratic areas to get out their likely voters.

Wise old ward leaders think they know everything about the city, so they never needed to do any study to find out where their strong areas were.

But they reckoned without John Turner.

John Turner had the idea that with smart strategizing, meticulous analysis, and thorough personalized campaigning, it would be possible to elect Art as mayor.

In the non-party designated primary, the highest two candidates were nominated to the general election. It was a foregone conclusion that incumbent Peterson would be one of these. Therefore, John figured, there was nothing to lose in a generalized get-out-the-vote campaign for Naftalin in Republican areas. Besides, these are generally more middle-class areas where the non-Republicans are not likely to be labor-union families.

But instead of relying on folk-wisdom, John Turner and I got the actual election data by precinct from past races, identified an old race that seemed to be purely partisan, and classified the precincts precisely on how Republican they were.

But at the same time, John believed that the ideological split among Democrats in normally Democratic areas could be exploited. He remembered an earlier race for school board where a labor-oriented candidate was running against a candidate endorsed by a non-partisan, civic-minded, big-business, good-government school committee. We figured the relative strength of those candidates. Then we combined the two ratings – Republican and good government – and ranked each precinct – about 300 of them – as to their “Naftalin potential.” Being teachers, we graded them A+ to F.

The campaign director was one of my graduate students with great organizing capacity and a steel will. He developed a dozen campaign activities, including several that could be area-specific, like door-knocking, telephoning from the reverse directory, lawn signs, sample ballots. The campaign director recruited believers, and saw to it that the proper activities were completed in the precincts graded A and B. The A precincts were done more than once. But workers were kept completely out of the D and F precincts.

Since the volunteers sensed that this was a campaign that knew what it was doing, they were more willing to work.

Naftalin himself had to be dragooned into going into the precincts where publicity could ensure the most local exposure. He – the former journalist – would rather have been back at headquarters writing press releases.

Well, Art came in second in the primary, trailing Peterson by 6,000 votes, but beating Roe by 7,000 votes. Everybody, including Art, had predicted he would be beaten. Art says he was the most surprised person in the city, since, as with all good managers, the candidate is never bothered with the messy details of the campaign.

The next barrier was the general election. To win, the strategy had to be reversed. Now the precincts had to be regraded. The obvious strategy would be to give all the strongest Republican areas Fs. No door-to-door work was done here, to avoid turning out mostly Republicans.

But one night after we had quit work, John had a major insight in the bathtub, sort of like Archimedes discovering how to detect pure gold by measuring its specific weight of gold.

Remember how Archimedes shouted “Eureka!”? I don’t know if John shouted, but he did get out of the tub and go back to the data. He found that in the previous election, Peterson had essentially shot his wad in the primary – he didn’t gain all that much in the general. The formula turned out to be that the primary total could be increased by 30 percent and it would raise Peterson’s vote total by only 5 percent. Campaigning could indeed be done in these precincts with the prospect of net gain.

The Democrat areas, even those won by Roe, were raised high in priority on the theory that even if they had preferred Roe, strong Democrats would rather vote for a Democrat than a Republican Peterson. The precinct work had to show the voters that Naftalin was the Democrat, and try to get as many of them out as possible.

Again, the efficient campaign director executed the plan to perfection, even going out on election eve to check that all the door hangers reminding people to vote were actually in place in the proper precincts.

Art was elected by a margin of 5,000 votes. Naftalin was dumbfounded. But Peterson was found dumb. His comment to the newspaper was, “We did worst in the wards we lost.” In fairness, he also added, “In our strong wards, we didn’t get as many votes as we needed.” That wasn’t an accident.

The next week, the best political writer for the *Tribune* had a story analyzing the campaign, displaying in detail what I have described here. Art read it, and found out what we had done. He became an advocate of data-driven campaigning.

What I want to emphasize is how unique this effort was. Any of you who these days are familiar with political campaigns at the local level are aware that political consultants by the dozens do this same kind of analysis for candidates. And they charge big-time consulting fees. It is actually a lot easier to do now with computers to handle the thousands of calculations. We did it all on the old Friedens – the kind where the carriage bounces noisily along as it figures percentages digit by digit. We worked almost every night in Turner’s dining room. I don’t know how Elsie got any sleep those nights.

I never heard any of this kind of data analysis being done in such a systematic way before. I know for sure that no one had ever written about it. I think John Turner invented it.

We made a proposal for a presentation of this campaign for a local government case-study series. But they didn’t want it, as they were dominated by public administration types who were more into counting manhole covers than how mayors got elected.

So the whole exploit is still largely a secret except for the 10 percent of the people who read the front page of the *Tribune*, Art himself, and now you birthday celebrants thirty-some years later. It’s probably just as well, because if word had gotten around, John Turner would have never had time for pursuing his stellar career in comparative government.