

DFL State Central Committee  
DFL Elected Officials and Former Candidates

Dear DFL friends:

We write to ask the DFL party to change its campaign strategy. As current and former DFL legislators, we believe that the party's well-intended but misguided campaign tactics cost us the majority in the House and the Senate.

Particularly in greater Minnesota, where there are few rural DFL legislators who survived recent elections, **most of the survivors are candidates who rejected the DFL coordinated campaign's tactics, which they consider counterproductive.** We believe that the DFL would have control of the legislature if the coordinated campaign\* did not have a poor strategy and if it had not pressured DFL legislative candidates to follow that strategy. **One rural DFL legislator who rejected the DFL tactics won with an 8% margin in a district that Trump won by 22% -- a thirty point spread!**

Because many hardworking staff, candidates, and volunteers invested so many hours in the current strategy, we recognize that the ideas in this memo may upset people. Nobody wants to hear that their efforts were not as productive as they could be. However, when **many DFL legislative candidates feel the DFL Party's expensive efforts to help them were, in reality, harming their campaigns,** it is essential to raise these concerns.

Despite the length of this letter, we ask you to read through it and take our concerns to heart. Without change, the DFL will continue to lose public support, and we will not win back control of the House and Senate. The future direction for the state is at stake.

A recent Star Tribune article headline explained the DFL's missed opportunity: *"With money, organization and dominance, DFL ponders what went wrong."* We didn't lose legislative and congressional races because we were outspent or out-organized; the DFL Party had huge advantages:

*"Despite high hopes for a crushing victory against Donald Trump that would also deliver wins in congressional and legislative races, the DFL lost seats in the Minnesota House — falling deeper into the minority — while surrendering control of the Senate, which was thought to be a bulwark against GOP legislative influence in St. Paul.*

*"These losses came despite a lopsided advantage in party organization and a reliable cadre of wealthy donors that helped the DFL employ 250 people across two dozen field offices. The Alliance for a Better Minnesota, a progressive group that backs DFL candidates, had spent \$3.6 million on TV, radio, digital and mail ads as of late October, even before the final two weeks of the race.*

*"All for naught."*

*(December 3, 2016 Star Tribune)*

We believe much of the blame for those losses comes from a counter-productive campaign strategy. The DFL's extensive financial and volunteer resources were not used wisely.

\* We use the term "coordinated campaign" to include the DFL Party, DFL legislative caucuses, and any other DFL campaigns or affiliated organizations using these campaign tactics and expecting legislative candidates to comply. Our goal is not to blame, but to get a change in tactics so that the party can win elections and regain control of the legislative majorities.

We raised these concerns in the past but many DFL leaders are unaware of our frustration. We believe a change in strategy is urgent, and ask the State Central Committee to act.

These points run counter to what many DFL activists and staffers consider as *accepted* knowledge. However, instead of dismissing our concerns, please examine these ideas from the perspective of the most important people in the electoral process: the voters. After all, the point of any campaign is to influence those voters. Here are our two chief concerns. (Comments from a variety of DFL legislators are included in italics)

## Selective Doorknocking

In recent campaigns, the DFL coordinated campaign and legislative caucuses have been instructing campaign staff, volunteers, and DFL campaigns to do **selective doorknocking**, where instead of knocking at every door, they provide walk lists of selective households to hit on any given street, **often targeting fewer than 1/4 of all households**. This selective focus may be appropriate in a primary or special election where only a small percentage of people vote. However, when our campaigns are hitting less than a third of the electorate in a general election, we are hurting our own efforts.

**1. The DFL actually encourages candidates to *exclude* outreach to about 2/3rds of the electorate before the campaign really begins.** The coordinated campaign excludes voters we believe (based on frequently inaccurate information) to be strong DFLers or Republicans. It also excludes people who register on election day, and those who have not voted in the past. Getting new people to vote *should be* one of the DFL's goals in the campaign. We hurt our chances of winning when we ignore 2/3rds of the electorate.

Most voters couldn't name their incumbent legislators, let alone the new candidates running. Many don't decide how to vote until a week or two before the election, yet this strategy presupposes that we can ignore most voters from the start, and future contacts often depend on the (frequently uninformed) response they gave us in past campaigns.

*From a rural DFL House member: "Trump won my district by 22%, yet I won by 8% (a 30% point spread!) This would not have happened without knocking on every door and visiting with and LISTENING to Republicans and Independents." Trump's lopsided victory made it more difficult for DFLers to win, but this shows a good campaign can overcome large margins.*

*From a rural DFL former House member: "(Contrary to the demands of the coordinated campaign) we door knock and lit drop every home. I won the first time and came close the second time because I had the support of many moderate Republicans, which I probably would not have reached with targeted door knocking. We collect zero data at the door... We concentrate on talking to people."*

*From a suburban DFL Senator: "By doing (what the coordinated campaign wants), you are rejecting about 2/3 of your district. They'll never get to know you if they don't already. You'll miss getting lawnsigns in yards where people don't vote but will take a sign, you'll miss getting some people to register to vote."*

**2. Skipping doors sends the message that some voters are not important to us.** One rural DFL legislator explained that skipping houses is foolish because "people talk to their

*neighbors.” When they learn that a candidate went down their street and skipped their house, they get the message that they don’t matter. That legislator attributed the loss of the DFL Senate incumbent in 2010 to the selective doorknocking. He said, “(The 2012 Republican Senate candidate) is going to every house... (the DFL Candidate) is not and the word of mouth is slowly getting that message out.” Not surprisingly, the DFL candidate lost again in 2012 and 2016.*

*From another rural DFL House member: “In Greater MN you need to "touch them all". I don't help in caucus door knocks because I do not use the failed system and won't!" This candidate said that a neighboring DFL House member attributed her reelection defeat a few years ago to the selective doorknocking.*

## **Friendly Doorknock Conversations Have Become Hostile Encounters**

One of the few opportunities for a political campaign to break through the cynicism of voters is through one-on-one, door-to-door contacts and phone calls.

In the past, doorknocking was one of the most effective strategies for DFL candidates. Candidates and their volunteers understood that *the* purpose of each contact was to make the voter feel positive about the candidate, with the hope that the voter will like, trust, and ultimately vote for the candidate. Most candidates and campaigns have an intuitive sense of the importance of coming across in a friendly, positive manner – using both small talk and political ideas.

**1. The DFL has taken the most personal, friendly contacts between campaigns and voters, and turned them into an attempt to pressure voters into disclosing information they consider private.** Instead of aiming at positive conversations with voters, the coordinated campaign treats them as sources of data that the DFL needs to collect. It treats voters as if they were political widgets, not people. The primary purpose of voter contacts has switched from persuading them to support a candidate, to getting data from them for the VAN.

The script that the coordinated campaign gives to doorknockers is *offensive* to some voters. Many people object to answering questions (from a stranger at their door) about which candidates or party they support. Even if they answer one or two questions, the canvasser seldom gets to ask more than a couple questions before the voter becomes so uncomfortable with the grilling that the canvasser stops asking. The coordinated campaign has acknowledged that even the most polite, effective doorknock volunteers are unable to complete the full script.

*From a rural DFL Senator: “I am especially concerned about creating a hostile environment for our candidates in challenging races like mine. I feel like the "system" of gathering information has become more important than the final outcome. We are not dealing with widgets that can be neatly packaged and delivered on election day. We are dealing with human beings. The most important thing we need to do is give them a good feeling about the candidate. We don't do that by grilling the voters and connecting that with our candidates.”*

It would be better for DFL candidates if Republican campaigns were the ones conducting the intrusive inquisition and our candidates focused on friendly, positive connections.

Because of the negative impression left by voter survey efforts, a number of candidates have told the coordinated campaign *not* to distribute their literature when voter identification is conducted. *From a rural DFL incumbent (who lost his reelection): “In my head (the) coordinated campaign*

*(should)...not be skipping homes, taking clumsy surveys and otherwise making people uncomfortable” He said that he was so troubled by the impact of the coordinated campaign, which was supposed to be **helping** him, that **“I have asked them to not drop my lit.”***

*From a suburban DFL Senator: “This has been a failed system... It's expensive, it avoids the base, it does nothing to build the candidate up or improve the chances. In fact...it alienates people against the candidate. When people are surveyed and then handed the candidate's literature, they blame the candidate for it... This data collection should and could be done in an off campaign year - never with a candidate or his/her volunteers doing a survey. Your job is to get the public to know your name and see your smiling face. Your volunteer's job is to tell people how great you are and to leave the constituent smiling if possible. Name recognition is the number 1 concern - and it must be positive.*

**2. Even the approach to the voter (with a clipboard or I-Pad for data collection) and asking to speak to a specific household member is intrusive and can create a hostile atmosphere for the voter.** When the canvasser asks for a specific household member, it informs the voter that the stranger at their door knows the names of household members and perhaps other personal information about them. Because this is followed by questions about their politics, which many people consider to be personal information, it makes the entire encounter a hostile experience for the voter we are trying to win over. While many will reluctantly provide information because they don't want to be confrontational, but even they begin to object after getting more than one or two questions.

*From Metro DFL House member: “Sending people out with clipboards is the kiss of death in getting doors open in our area. Residents have been trained by advocacy groups that clipboard equals petition followed by an ask for money.”*

**3. When the canvasser asks to speak to a specific household member (other than the person answering the door), it insults other household members, who assume that they don't matter.** Obviously, the canvasser could explain *why* they don't want to talk to the person at the door (because we *think* we already know their politics), but that would make the situation even worse. It would show that we see them as sources of political data, not voters whom we want to serve. *From a former DFL legislator (not a candidate in recent years) now living in a swing suburban district: “Two days before the election, two volunteers from the coordinated campaign came to my house wearing “Dump Trump” T-shirts. They quizzed my wife by asking who she was voting for... I was the one who answered the door **but they had no interest in talking to me.**”*

When voter contacts turn off voters, the activity is counterproductive; hurting DFL candidates rather than helping.

## **What are the DFL's Priorities?**

Is the DFL trying to help elect DFL candidates or is the DFL expecting candidates to do what the coordinated campaign wants to do for its sake? *From a suburban DFL House member: “I knock every door... I really don't pay any attention to what the coordinated campaign wants or thinks...**They try to get candidates and local campaigns to do the coordinated campaign's work.**”*

The DFL seems to treat fundraising and the VAN voter file as the *goal*, when they should be viewed only as tools to help elect candidates. Voter data can be helpful, but the coordinated campaign rewards its staff for getting more data, not for helping candidates win.

The DFL has invested incredible amounts of candidate, campaign, and party resources in building the voter file. **The result? The DFL now has the best voter file in the state, but Republicans control both houses of the legislature.**

The DFL would be much better off if it changed its priorities—if DFLers had a lousy voter file, but majorities in the House and the Senate. *From a rural DFL House candidate: “There is an old saying: “You can't fatten hogs by weighing them.” Data is great. However, I don't have the luxury of having people gauge how we're doing instead of persuading people. The additional data does not help enough with targeting my message or mailings to be worth it.”*

## **Candidates are Pressured by the DFL to follow its Strategy**

The selective doorknocking and voter identification strategy is **not** a matter of choice left to candidates and their local campaigns. The DFL tells candidates that if they refuse to follow the current system, they will cut off the party's help with the campaign. Candidates, especially new candidates, feel they have no choice but to do what they are told.

*From a suburban House incumbent: “I have refused to use the Coordinated Campaign's system and have been advised (warned) that support for my campaign MAY be dependent upon using their system. I have been doing this since 1980 as a campaign manager and a candidate. I know the importance of face-to-face contact. I simply will not use their "turf" sheets...they are essentially worthless.”*

*From a greater Minnesota Senate candidate: “They told us that if we did not use their “plan,” they would give us no support.”*

## **How accurate is Voter Data collected at the door?**

The data gathered in the VAN is often inaccurate. Most voters know little to nothing about one (or both) of the candidates in a race, so when canvassers ask who they are supporting in a specific race, their answers may often be meaningless (and some voters who consider the questions intrusive might give inaccurate answers rather than decline to answer).

*From a rural DFL former House member: “Collecting data... should be done by a centralized phone bank located in the Cities with paid workers under good supervisors which would dramatically improve the quality of the info in the voter file.”*

While information in the VAN is useful for get-out-the-vote and some targeting, it is **not** a good way to weed out a big chunk of the electorate before voters have even heard the candidate's name. We are told that these are "carefully targeted" homes, but the VAN is not that reliable. A volunteer for a Senate candidate in a suburban race, doorknocking the VAN's “swing” voters, found one of those homes was the Republican House candidate – not exactly a swing voter.

*From a rural DFL former legislator running again: “In my district, about two out of five homes are not listed in the VAN. These appear to be a mix of non-voters, recent move-ins, and*

*oversights. One day, I found two mayors of adjoining small towns by knocking every door; neither was listed in my VAN lists. I found a city councilman of twelve years, a head election judge, and even a person who once went to the state DFL convention; all missing from the VAN. I decided to ignore the State DFL and simply run my own campaign. It almost feels as if there is an agenda different from winning.”*

The point of this memo is not to say the VAN is worthless, but to challenge the DFL's priority of gathering data, when doing so is damaging DFL chances of winning.

Furthermore, gathering voter ID data about specific candidates early in the race makes the information in the VAN less accurate. Asking for voter preference when 80 or 90% of the voters haven't even heard the candidate's name, guarantees the information collected will be inaccurate.

Relying on the VAN for accurate information has devastated many DFL candidates. Many were told they were in good shape based on information collected in the VAN, so they were stunned when they lost their races, often by significant margins.

(For those not familiar with the terminology, in the following examples, the terms “target number” or “win number” are the number of successful voter IDs the DFL tells candidates they need in order to win)

*From a Suburban DFL House member: “This obsession with a target number and how one gets there is beyond belief. Two years ago (the DFL Senate incumbent) hit his "target" in mid-September. He continued aggressively campaigning, only to lose by thousands of votes. According to (the neighboring district's DFL Senate candidate's) target number, he **won** his race in early September. (However) he did not carry a single precinct...”*

*From a suburban House challenger: I remember a meeting one night (in 2008) in which our House candidate... was ecstatic because he'd reached his, "win number." Yet, he lost the election by over 2,000 votes.”*

## **How Should Voter Data Be Collected?**

Overall, the DFL Party has been captivated by campaign strategists who have pushed the party to adopt costly, resource intensive, data-driven formulas they believe will win elections. After each failure, their solution is to devote *more* resources to gathering *more* data. As you can see in this excellent analysis in Politico, “**Data-Driven' Campaigns Are Killing the Democratic Party**” [click here to read](#), this will lead us to future defeat.

When data is gathered, voter surveying done by phone is seen by voters as a public opinion poll, and even if they think it is too intrusive, they don't pin the blame on any particular candidate(s). However, when the survey is done at the door by a volunteer who hands them a candidate's literature, we are telling the voters who to blame for intruding on their privacy, and likely, adding to the inaccuracy of the survey.

If voter data is collected door-to-door, it should be done in off-years, not in conjunction with DFL campaigns. While that off-year data will not contain information about specific legislative races, it will provide more accurate information about party identification, issues of concern, etc.

*From a Metro DFL House member: "I feel strongly that voter ID work should be done... during non-election periods. Phones work best for ID and are much, much faster than volunteers getting lost trying to find the selected homes."*

## **Inefficient Use of Volunteer Time**

Selective doorknocking is an inefficient use of volunteer time. Volunteers often spend as much time searching for the correct houses on walk lists as they spend actually going to the doors.

*From a rural DFL House candidate and long-time party volunteer: "I've wasted a lot of time and missed countless people. Many homes in small towns don't have house numbers and others aren't located where the VAN suggests (there are a lot of "phantom" houses, because I sure can't find them). I want to go to every door. Also, I have felt really uncomfortable about walking past houses, especially when I know the people who live there."*

When a volunteer doorknocks every house on a block, they can hit about three times as many doors as the coordinated campaign volunteers can hit per hour. **For the same amount of time and effort, we could triple the number of homes that volunteers can contact**, and with a more appropriate script, they could be positive, friendly conversations that gain supporters, rather than hostile data-gathering.

## **Turning Off Volunteers**

**Grilling voters is a big turn-off to volunteers.** Some candidates report they lose volunteers because people want to campaign for them, not gather data. For many volunteers, asking voters who they support is as unpleasant as asking for money. As a result, this strategy not only uses volunteers inefficiently, it also reduces the number of volunteers willing to help.

It is easier to find volunteers when voter contacts are focused on friendly conversations, encouraging voters to consider our candidates. And, if these are awkward conversations for the canvasser, imagine how the voters feel about them.

*Metro DFL House incumbent: "Volunteers... HATE asking the long list of questions and jumping around from one area to another but are glad to go door to door as a friendly face persuading their neighbors to support candidates they believe in."*

## **The Harm from Relying on this Early, Often Inaccurate, Information**

In one long-time DFL legislator's first campaign, the DFL Party conducted a **poll** (not the voter survey, but an actual poll) in his district in early August. **The results: the Republican - 55%, the DFLer - 24%**. Such poll numbers are devastating results for any candidate, yet three months later, that DFL candidate won.

That poll was more accurate than the VAN. It was conducted by trained phoners, with a precise script and no attempt at persuasion. The DFL candidate *was* far behind in the race because nobody knew who he was. But he and his volunteers doorknocked every door, hitting most doors multiple times. By the end of the campaign people knew who he was – they had had brief,

friendly conversations with thousands of voters, without grilling them on whom they were supporting.

If his campaign had targeted voter contacts based on voter surveying done during the campaign, he would have been conceding defeat – even if he picked up 100% of the undecideds, he would have lost with 45% of the vote, because his better-known opponent already had 55%. Targeting voters under the coordinated campaign's system would have guaranteed a defeat in his race.

## Request for Change

It is too late for the 2016 election. Republicans control of the legislature. But we need to implement change now. The DFL Party has taken one of the most positive campaign tools – brief, friendly conversations at the door, with every voter, and turned them into a negative.

When many DFL candidates believe that the party's expensive efforts to help them are actually hurting, it is time to change. We want a DFL majority, yet our tactics doom many DFL candidates to defeat, no matter how hard they work.

The DFL Party has not been losing because of a lack of money or organization. **We have been losing because we have a campaign strategy that intentionally ignores many voters and offends others.** We urge an immediate change in the coordinated campaign strategy.

Sincerely,

Sen. John Marty (Roseville)

Rep. Zach Dorholt\* (St. Cloud)

Rep. Jeanne Poppe (Austin)

Senator Kent Eken (Twin Valley)

Sen. Barb Goodwin\* (Columbia Heights)

Rep. Paul Marquart (Dilworth)

Rep. John Persell\* (Bemidji)

Sen. Chris Eaton (Brooklyn Center)

Rep. Alice Hausman (St. Paul)

Rep. Mindy Greiling\* (Roseville)

Rep. Mary Sawatzky\* (Willmar)

Sen. Dan Skogen\* (Hewitt)

Sen. Carolyn Laine (Columbia Heights)

Sen. Patricia Torres Ray (Minneapolis)

Rep. Paul Rosenthal (Edina)

Rep. David Bly (Northfield)

Rep. Linda Slocum (Richfield)

\**former* legislator