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Beating B-1 Bob

Underdog Ends Conservative's Congressional Career in California's 46th District in 1996

REP. BOB DORNAN (R) VS. LORETTA SANCHEZ (D)

Bill Wachob and Andrew Kennedy

In some respects, the contest for California's 46th Congressional District was an aberration on the 1996 electoral map. A study in political contrasts, the race matched Democratic challenger and political newcomer Loretta Sanchez with eight-term incumbent Robert Dornan—a Republican firebrand noted for his searing political rhetoric.

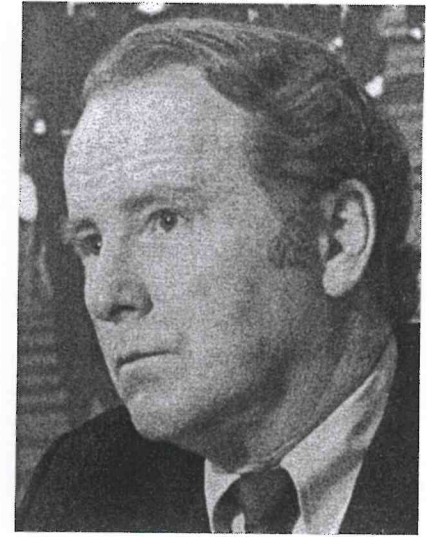
The campaign to beat congressman Dornan can best be summarized by the following words: *hard work*—nobody worked harder than Loretta Sanchez; *persistence*—even in the face of many naysayers, Loretta Sanchez pushed on; *change*—Orange County is changing, Sanchez knew it, Dornan did not; *risk*—the willingness to risk a different approach and use cable television; and *repetition*—as in repetitive, message-driven television and mail.

Divisive Style

Tenacious, confident, and eternally optimistic are the best words to describe Loretta Sanchez. In early January, with the primary three months away, Loretta termed herself "the candidate to beat Bob Dornan." She tackled her campaign responsibilities with extraordinary enthusiasm. But she was different—at one point even taking bags of mail to the post office so they would be sure to drop on time, after she had put labels on the mail herself. A prolific fundraiser, Sanchez made a priority of campaign activities that gave her candidacy its distinctive grassroots appeal. Precinct walking, candidate meet-and-greets, and civic forum appearances—she excelled at



Loretta Sanchez



Bob Dornan

them all. Her campaign odyssey through the 46th District seemed a homecoming for the thirty-six-year-old Democrat, whose family roots in Orange County stretch over half a century.

Having served in the House of Representatives off and on for nearly two decades, Dornan had seen his ties to the district grow tenuous in recent years. His divisive and confrontational style, his arch-conservative ideology, and his Cold War rhetoric no longer resonated with Orange County voters, whose real-life experiences were far removed from the apparitions dominating Dornan's political prism. Moreover, his quixotic quest for the GOP presidential nomination left him scrambling for money in the final months of his reelection campaign. Appearing to take the support of his constituents for granted, Dornan's last-minute appeals for another term proved unconvincing.

Changing Demographics

A blue collar community, full of older homes and younger families, the 46th District in the 1990s is a cultural melting pot that has undergone significant change. Its image as a mostly white, middle-class bedrock of Nixonian conservatism is a distant memory. Of its 570,963 residents, 50 percent are Hispanic, 35 percent Caucasian, 12 percent Asian, and 2 percent African American.

Two years ago, Dornan defeated Democratic challenger Michael Farber 57 percent to 37 percent, with Libertarian Richard Newhouse receiving 6 percent. Dornan outspent his rival \$2.3 million to \$302,000. In 1992, George Bush led Bill Clinton in the district 40 percent to 37 percent; Ross Perot scored a sizable 23 points. Historically known as a bastion of Republicanism, the 46th District has become increasingly Democratic in recent years. Orange County's changing demographics worked in favor of Loretta Sanchez's candidacy. In the spring of 1996, voter registration favored the Democratic Party by 46 percent to 40 percent. The appeal of a Latina businesswoman whose platform addressed the needs of working families struck a resonant cord with voters.

Her election, though by a razor-thin margin, nevertheless proved a significant milestone in Orange County politics: the region's only district with a Democratic plurality had sent its first woman and Hispanic representative to Congress.

Repetition, Repetition

Our firm, the Campaign Group, Inc., was hired in January 1996 to provide general consulting and electronic media for the Sanchez campaign. M&R Strategic Services was hired at the same time to produce direct mail for the campaign. In August, John Shallman was recruited to oversee the day-to-day campaign. Shallman, a respected veteran of Los Angeles politics, uniquely understood the components necessary to defeat an incumbent member of Congress. It was Shallman who set realistic fundraising goals and put together the tactics necessary for victory. He did a superb job juggling all of the balls to fund television, mail, and voter outreach efforts.

Another key decision was the hiring of Lake Research to do polling. Celinda Lake and Peter Feld provided invaluable insight into targeting and issue groupings that were key to defeating an incumbent such as Bob Dornan.

The value of this team was its ability to work together and to use its past experiences to model a unique campaign that looked beyond conventional wisdom.

All good campaigns need a mantra to live by. Tip O'Neill's was "All politics is local." James Carville's was "It's the economy, stupid!" The Sanchez campaign mantra was "Repetition, Repetition, Repetition!" Keep the message local and simple and say it to as many voters as possible and as many times as possible. When you think you have said it enough, say it again.

Our goal in the March 1996 primary election, and again in the fall general election, was to achieve a critical mass of message frequency in the most cost efficient way. With this in mind we decided to use persuasion

mail as a main communications medium. After a thorough cost analysis, we also chose to use a medium that Dornan and past Orange County campaigns failed to use—cable television spots.

The decision to adopt this strategy was by no means easy to come by. The campaign team was divided, with the Orange County advisors arguing against the use of cable television as too inefficient and expensive. If the cable television strategy failed, they argued, the campaign would be broke. It was a high-risk play.

However, we needed to move poll numbers—quickly. If we did not, we would not have the resources necessary to wage the fall campaign. If it worked, Sanchez would have enough resources to compete effectively with Dornan in the crucial final weeks. We knew from earlier polling that the incumbent was weak, with his reelect rating hovering around 30 percent.

The cable television strategy was put into place. Buying on as many as three cable systems and at least six networks per system, including ESPN, USA, LIFETIME, and CNN, our goal was to get as much message frequency as possible over a three week period. Two early spots, one thirty seconds and one sixty seconds, featured Sanchez as a homegrown leader of Orange County, fighting for secure jobs and safe neighborhoods, good schools for our children, and college loans for the middle class.

In three weeks, the poll numbers moved. Sanchez went from 25 percent of the vote to 43 percent—putting her in a virtual dead heat with Dornan. This rapid movement also worked to convince the Washington, D.C., political action committee community that Dornan was in fact in serious danger.

With Dornan in an obvious panic and searching for a life boat, we began airing two additional spots, both thirty seconds. One ad contrasted the candidates on the issues of education, seniors, crime, and choice. The second spot was a hard-hitting negative, defining Dornan as an out of touch elected official more concerned with his own stature than the needs of the district. These spots continued through the final three weeks of the campaign.

Turning on the Spigot

The Sanchez direct mail program was enhanced by a unique feature of this district: extremely low voter turnout. In 1992, approximately 110,000 people showed up to vote in the 46th District—which is about half of a normal turnout in other districts in California. Through targeting that included the elimination of Republicans in traditionally conservative precincts, we lowered our mail universe to a highly manageable 40,000–50,000 voters. Keeping costs low by adhering to a simple message and easily identified targets enabled us to get more frequency. By combining print jobs, we were

able to fashion a low cost program that included ten mail pieces to the entire base universe and an additional five pieces to smaller segments of the universe.

The goal of the mail program was to reach swing or persuadable voters as well as to communicate with low-frequency voters who viewed Sanchez's campaign favorably for GOTV (get out the vote) purposes. The early mail pieces were designed to take full advantage of suspicions about Dornan's record in Congress, while ensuring that they also would define our candidate as the right alternative.

The attack mail pieces focused largely on Dornan's record as an out-of-touch member of Congress who took fifty-four foreign junkets, drew a huge salary, and had a million-dollar pension waiting for him—while he was voting against Medicare, Medicaid, and increases in the minimum wage. They also took him to task for wasting taxpayer money by giving useless floor speeches in the U.S. House to enhance his own national exposure before C-SPAN audiences while voting to cut funding for police.

About two weeks before election day, Dornan turned on the spigot of negative advertising against Sanchez. By this time, our polling numbers had shown us drawing even and our goal was to neutralize Dornan's ability to question Sanchez's record. As planned, the tone of our direct mail shifted. We counterattacked by drawing attention to his uniquely nasty nature. One mail piece used Sanchez's mom as the messenger, pointing out Dornan's broken promise to talk about issues rather than launch personal attacks. The same mailer directly rebutted each of Dornan's arguments about Sanchez with evidence of his hypocrisy. Another piece titled "Distortion" highlighted a press advisory written by Project Vote Smart that lambasted Dornan for distorting their information on Sanchez's positions.

We also mailed pieces from credible third parties that were designed to increase Sanchez's credibility as a candidate. These mailers, in the aggregate, reduced the credibility of the GOP attack against Sanchez. Dornan also damaged his own effectiveness by cramming too much text and hyperbole into each mail piece.

In the final days we shifted the tone of the mail campaign again, reverting to positive messages to ensure that the last impression of Sanchez would be favorable. A piece titled "Babies" showed two children sitting on an American flag with the subtitle: "Vote for Us." It focused on Sanchez's interest in helping working families and ensuring that education funding would be protected.

Direct mail, combined with six weeks of message-driven cable television spots, suffocated Dornan's response and effectively put out his bombastic flame. For every piece of mail he sent, we had at least two to counter. In the final week, ten pro-Sanchez pieces dropped, including, serendipitously, four

created and paid for by independent expenditure campaigns. Dornan had, we estimate, six pieces in the last week with no television.

While the bulk of the Sanchez mail assault focused on persuasion, John Shallman worked with the coordinated campaign and a local Assembly candidate to fashion a considerable get-out-the-vote and absentee mail program targeted to the Hispanic community. In the end, while the mail and cable television campaign brought Sanchez even with Dornan, our election day turnout program sent her over the top. More absentee ballots were ultimately sent in by Democrats than by Republicans, an uncommon trend in southern California. Sanchez outspent Dornan \$760,000 to \$681,000. On election night, Sanchez was behind by 233 votes. However, after a week of counting late absentees, Sanchez won by over 900 votes.

A tireless challenger, Sanchez won because she had a plan, stuck to it, and deployed the latest in campaign targeting and communications. Her well-known opponent was an out-of-touch incumbent who took the race for granted. He relied on outdated tactics and shrill attacks.

In the end, even "B-1 Bob" was no match for a hard-working candidate with a good grassroots campaign that had both message discipline and tactical sophistication.