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FEATURE

How the 'Resistance' Helped Democrats Dominate Virginia

For campaign managers like Kathryn Sorenson, much of their job was simply channeling the enormous wave of energy that came their way.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Nov. 13, 2017

On the morning of the Women's March on Washington in January, Kathryn Sorenson was an hour west of D.C., en route to her new apartment, when a car broadsided her and broke her neck. She had been passing through a dangerous intersection — busy roads, no stoplights — and her first thought, as she waited for the ambulance to arrive, was about the inadequacy of local governance: In the Northern Virginia exurbs, rapid growth has long outstripped traffic oversight. Still, as a young Democratic campaign manager, it seemed to her vaguely unprofessional to have broken her neck on such a politically momentous day. "I wasn't even out fighting the machine," she said, "just coming back from the dry cleaners." The first to arrive at her hospital bed — before her mother — were David Reid, a local businessman, and his wife, who had called around to every regional emergency room until they found her.

Even if she hadn't broken her neck, she most likely couldn't have taken even a few hours off work to attend the march: She was the manager, and sole employee, of the two-week-old David Reid for Delegate campaign. Sorenson met Reid on New Year's Day for a mutual interview; Reid, a well-kept, goateed father of two in his mid-50s, was a latecomer to politics, and was relieved when Sorenson agreed to lead his campaign for the House of Delegates, the 100-member lower chamber of

Virginia's legislature. In her six years out of college, Sorenson had worked continuously on campaigns, all but one of them in Northern Virginia, and despite her youth, she exhibited the grim, sardonic cheer of the veteran operative.

Sorenson agreed to work with a novice like Reid because he seemed committed to real issues, and he made a sincere first impression. Also, she liked his odds. Virginia's 32nd house district is part of Loudoun County, one of the fastest growing counties in the country and, by median income, the wealthiest. Verdant, indistinguishable subdivisions are laid out in self-contained loops between windowed blocks of strip mall and windowless blocks of data center. There are overpasses to nowhere; there are construction sites that look like Caterpillar sales lots as well as actual Caterpillar sales lots. The county and its schools are around 30 percent nonwhite, with a large immigrant population. (Sorenson's favorite local lunch spot is an Afghan kebab joint.) The 32nd went for Hillary Clinton by 19 points. There was, Sorenson quickly got into the habit of saying, "absolutely no reason this district has a Republican delegate."

The day she took the job, Sorenson put together an Excel document with all the precinct-level returns from the 2013 race, which the Democrat lost by only 651 votes. "I looked for where we needed to run it up, where we needed to hold our own and where it was going to be hand-to-hand combat." She soon came to understand, however, that her seasons of training had hardly prepared her for the new political reality. Twelve days after her accident, she went to a meeting of the Loudoun County Democratic Committee, expecting to encounter the usual 30-odd regulars. Instead, she found 300 new faces. "Who the heck are all these people?" she wondered. It was, after all, an off-election year, and it was *winter*.

They had come, she realized, on behalf of what she began to call "the pop-up groups." She went to as many of their meetings as she could and found that many of their members were largely unacquainted with politics, especially on the local level. Some of them weren't even county residents; they were from McLean, and Arlington, and D.C., and even Maryland. Though a majority of these meetings

might have been better described as meetings about meetings, she nevertheless admired all these new faces and the vitality they were prepared to bring to what were ordinarily considered marginal down-ballot races.

Sorenson, whose one-woman campaign — the candidate had a demanding day job — was limited by a cumbersome and unsightly cervical collar, had few illusions that all these new volunteer hearts had been set aflame by the local business owner and retired Navy Reserve commander David Reid, even if everybody who met him agreed right away that he seemed like a profoundly decent guy with the right priorities. She knew that their primary motivation was their hatred for the president, and that their secondary motivation was their hatred of their local Republican congresswoman, but she was optimistic that they might be taught to direct some of their umbrage toward Reid's incumbent Republican opponent, Tag — "Sorry," she'd say, with mock solemnity, "*Delegate Greason*."

What Sorenson needed from these inchoate volunteer armies, however, was not a collective expression of outrage; it was reliable support for campaign practicalities like door-knocking and phone-banking, tasks that lacked the glamour and solidarity of marches and protests. Even those who could readily speak about state and local issues — how the Republicans in the House of Delegates had refused the Medicaid expansion and passed a sheaf of anti-abortion bills; how Loudoun County was the only district in Northern Virginia without full-day kindergarten; how somebody needed to put a stoplight at Waxpool and Demott, where Sorenson was almost killed — were rarely acquainted with the proper channels for action. They would talk about calling their representative, and Sorenson would say, "That's not a congressional thing, that's a state thing!" or "That's not a state thing, that's a supervisor thing! Call your supervisor!" Sorenson showed them how to find out who their supervisors were. They wanted to write letters to Terry McAuliffe, the governor, about bathroom discrimination. She said: "Don't write letters to Terry! The bathroom bill is dead, don't worry. It died in subcommittee, and even if it hadn't, Terry had already promised to veto it, so pick a better battle!"

If a more grizzled campaign manager might have thought only to harness this energy, Sorenson saw an opportunity to help organize it. When the volunteers made proposals that seemed impractical or irrelevant, she did not issue judgment. "I didn't want to rain on their ideas," she said. Instead, she gently tried to usher them in productive directions. She told them about what a great guy David Reid was, how he'd come from poverty and sent his two girls to local public schools and today stood for full-day kindergarten and gun control and Medicaid expansion and distance-based tolls on the Dulles Greenway. She also told them about Reid's Republican opponent, Tag — "Sorry, *Delegate* Greason" — and all the party-line votes he'd made down in Richmond. "He votes 99 percent of the time with the Republican leadership. From assault rifles to bazookas to ninja stars, he's for it."

To get Reid on the ballot, Sorenson explained, the campaign needed to collect 125 signatures by March. The pop-up groups were happy to help, especially because Sorenson had a pleasant, easygoing appeal, not to mention a broken neck. Within a few weeks, she was given almost 600 names. She couldn't quite account for how it was done; these groups didn't have leadership, exactly, or if they did, they had large "steering committees" — and they could be touchy if you used the wrong word or gave one individual too much credit — but they used Facebook and they contacted friends of friends and somehow they got the signatures they needed. And not only that. Representatives from some groups got the required signatures, and then representatives from some other groups materialized to vet those signatures and remove inadvertent out-of-district signatories, and then still other representatives from different or maybe the same groups suggested they might help Sorenson by formatting all of that petition data so they could merge the relevant information with their master voter file. As long as Sorenson was explicit about what she needed, it all seemed to just ... happen.

In the months after Trump's inauguration, there was no shortage of expressive opportunities for the left — protests, actions — but few electoral conduits for its new resolve. Virginia provided one of them. In what Sorenson unsentimentally called "16," Hillary Clinton carried the state by more than five points, but the previous year's election had preserved for the Republicans a considerable edge in

the House of Delegates: 66 to 34. Not a single incumbent lost. Now, in advance of 2017, Democrats couldn't help thinking it auspicious that exactly 17 of those Republican delegates came from Clinton districts. If the party could flip only those seats this year, it would come away with a 51-49 majority. This seemed like a totally fanciful possibility to Sorenson herself, but she wasn't blind to its inspirational potency: Flip the Hillary districts, flip the house.

A majority of the pop-up groups were experiments in decentralized organizing, so individual chapters were free to expend their energy where and how they pleased. Nevertheless, given the scarcity of actual elections this year, they flocked in disproportionate numbers to Virginia — and in particular to its 32nd district. Reid's district had no primary, for one thing, and seemed acutely winnable. It also had Sorenson. She was not only competent; she was, at least outwardly, calm. She also reached out to each group on its own terms, even if that effort alone absorbed three or four hours of each day. And she didn't want to seem exploitative, so she refused on principle to blast the groups' lists with what she called "hair-on-fire send-$5-now-or-the-world-will-end emails."

Though in theory these groups had diverse goals, the impression they made on Sorenson was one of a great, reverberant longing. "There's just this huge energy," Sorenson told me, "with people saying, 'We want to do something right now, we want to effect change in this election.' " They were hard to keep track of: who was with which group, what each one cared about, which groups were subgroups or affinity groups of other groups, which had national umbrella organizations and which didn't, which terms of art groups preferred to describe their particular variety of leaderlessness. There were chapters and huddles and pods, and they used Google Forms or Google Docs or Eventbrites or Meetups. She found herself scrolling through endless Facebook commentaries in search of group moderators or other sources of provisional authority.

She began to build her own Google Doc as a central storehouse for all the fugitive information. This color-coded document included but was not limited to, in no particular order, the following groups: 31st Street Swing Left; Code Blue; Indivisible Del Ray; Indivisible VA Assembly 42; Network NoVA; NOVANation

Coalition; Sister District DC; Sister District Maryland; Swing Left; Together We Will NoVA; Vienna Neighbors United; VOTE MOB VA; WofA (We of Action); ACT Empowered; We ARE the People Who Stand Up; Loudoun 4 Women's March on Washington; Hunter Mill Huddle; Arlington Huddle Action Network; Neighbors for a Blue Virginia; Ward 3 Democrats; the Resurgent Left; Turn It Blue DC (formerly Swing Left NE DC); Dining for Democracy; #Citizen. Sorenson got a kick out of the names the groups had given themselves. She loved one called the Huddlery.

Sorenson's list included the names of the principals, to which she often felt obligated to append the qualification "(co-leader?)" or "(steering committee member?)." She documented their purpose, insofar as she could divine it; her perception of their viability ("all talk no plans"); and their willingness to help the Reid campaign to, as her own hashtag put it, #flip32blue. Each of the groups wanted Sorenson to make some kind of pitch for why they should direct their resources her way. Some, like Flippable, had former campaign people on staff; they just needed to hear the numbers and they'd mail a check. Others, like the West L.A. Democratic Club, asked her questions for an hour before saying no. Some had clear purity tests — "Will you take the no-PAC-money-ever pledge?" "Were you endorsed by Senator Sanders?" — and Sorenson's campaign didn't always check all the boxes. Others were concerned that she didn't need the help badly enough.

Sorenson did her best to put her candidate and their campaign up for adoption in a way that made their specific requirements clear. It was going to be expensive, for one thing. They had to raise at least $400,000, or $500,000 if she wanted her "Cadillac plan." The map of Loudoun County is a Mandelbrot set of nested subdivisions, and three of her precincts — the Villas, Lansdowne Woods and the Ashby Ponds retirement community — are gated and thus "unknockable," which meant the campaign would have to double down on phone banking. This would require a lot of coordination. Running against a seven-year incumbent, Reid also faced a huge deficit in name recognition, which meant that early preparatory canvassing was just as important as a late turnout effort.

Money and time would always be the hardest asks, but while Sorenson was still neck-braced and understaffed, there were plenty of basic start-up tasks to complete. One outfit offered to make the campaign an easily updatable website. Another sent a member to take photographs, which saved the campaign $700. Sorenson offhandedly mentioned that it would be nice to have a spreadsheet itemizing all of Tag Greason's votes in his seven years in the House of Delegates — bill number, how he voted, why it matters. She had it within hours. Yet another organization delivered print-at-home postcards that recalled classic Americana, marked with parks and schools and polling places; she wanted people to keep in mind that the 32nd district was an actual place. She loved the postcards, even if she had to send repeated reminders about which disclosures were necessary to make them compliant with campaign-finance law.

It wasn't lost on her that some of the work being done was redundant, and that some of her interactions required more effort than they ultimately returned, but Sorenson understood that the new spirits were fragile. She tried to remind herself that each group brought its own perspective or talent, even as her attempt to outline their special characteristics revealed a litany of special needs. One group was part of a Jewish organization and thus couldn't canvass on Saturdays. Another one wanted to know how to get over to Loudoun without paying tolls, and many of its members were older and needed printed directions or car pools. But Sorenson's willingness to keep track of and accommodate all these preferences gave her word-of-mouth fame. No research trial — volunteer-coordination software, fund-raising by text message — was too small or bug-ridden for her to disdain, and she joked that she was first in every line to serve as a guinea pig.

In June, Shaun Daniels, then an executive director of an influential PAC called Win Virginia, told me, "No one anywhere is working with more outside groups than Kathryn." Democratic politics had entered a new era of experimentation, he said, and "this here is ground zero."

By the middle of June, Sorenson had hired a field director and a field organizer, both from the Clinton campaign. They chose the weekend of June 24 for their earnest summer opener — a "Weekend of Action" — in part because it coincided

with a Network NoVA event called the Women's Summit. This daylong happening brought together participants from across the pop-up group universe to hear speeches from 35 of the House of Delegate candidates left standing after the Democratic primaries the week before. These primaries had delivered a remarkable slate — most of them first-time candidates, a majority of them women, including many from the working class and many of color. Sorenson did not feel competitive, and had great warmth for her colleagues in other races, but she knew that some of the pop-up groups would be tempted to exchange Reid for a candidate of greater charisma or a more diverse background, like the sheep farmer in a nearby district. She didn't want her outside collaborators to forget that they joined up with her (and Reid's) effort early and for good reasons.

The other salient election was the recent runoff between Jon Ossoff and Karen Handel in Georgia's Sixth Congressional District. Sorenson herself was not disposed to draw any big lessons from Ossoff's defeat, which she was by nature unable to regard as a leading indicator on the president, or the Democratic Party, or the role of outside patrons. It seemed to her that the campaign was waged about as well as it could have been in a district that was close to impossible for a Democrat to win. For many of her volunteers, however, the loss felt like a dispiriting prelude to what was supposed to be a stirring campaign kickoff.

Early in the morning, a crowd of campaign staff members, longstanding volunteers and outside irregulars milled around Reid's home in anticipation of their canvassing shifts. The family's two shiba inus were underfoot, the coffee table was decorated with back issues of astronomy and archaeology magazines and the whole place smelled faintly but persistently of maple syrup. There were cars from Massachusetts and Missouri, and Reid joked more than once about how he kept meaning to give out an award for the person who traveled the farthest to be there. The volunteers were mostly women, and mostly middle-aged, and had come outfitted for day hikes of moderate exertion. Whenever one of them was asked which group, if any, she had come with, there was a perceptible pause as she thought about the profusion of mailers in her inbox and posts in her Facebook feed.

Those there for the first time were nervous about how they would be greeted. A woman from Vienna, Va., named Francesca, in capri-length cargo pants, sturdy boots and a beaded necklace, raised her hand. She had come on behalf of half a dozen groups. "Am I going to look like a carpetbagger, or should I say that I care so much that I came here from elsewhere?"

Reid looked to Sorenson before responding. "Nobody will ask you because you look like the district — it's pretty diverse here. We joke that we give an award for the person who came the furthest. All of this, here, it's really starting to make a difference." The volunteers were shuffled through a brief orientation, which was longer on Reid's biography — a foster child who was the first in his family to go to college; a local businessman who sent his daughters to the public schools; a retired Navy Reserve intelligence officer who gave 23 years of service to his country — than it was on his positions. But the point of the summer canvass was deliberately introductory.



Sorenson (right) and campaign workers at the home of their candidate, David Reid. Brian Ulrich for The New York Times

Francesca, the woman from Vienna, cleared a space for me in her cluttered minivan. She'd worked on clean-energy policy, she told me en route, but her entire department was recently eliminated. We passed a new data center across from a data center under construction. She delivered an impassioned monologue as she tried to pay attention to the GPS; she had an air of spiky distraction, as if stopping to scowl at news alerts while watching a TV show. "Now the Klan is out in Charlottesville when they take down the Confederate monuments. Just the other day I went to the website of the Southern Poverty Law Center for the first time in my life. It's intersectionality. If affluent people like me aren't caring about Black Lives Matter, well — it kind of opened my eyes. We can't ever not be engaged again. It's like the Founding Fathers' idea of the yeoman government. My progressive friends, they're on Facebook but they're not out canvassing and phone-banking. There's nothing else going on in '17, and there's all this pent-up energy."

Francesca said she had gone to the Women's Summit the previous morning and left exhilarated, but what she took away from the conference wasn't wholly clear. Each delegate emphasized the importance of gerrymandering, and health care, and school funding, and rural broadband, and the state of the roads. If the national Democratic Party really was in crisis, torn between cultural politics and pocketbook issues, it certainly wasn't visible at the summit. The biggest applause line of the day came from Danica Roem, a transgender former journalist and "freshman member of the Democratic Party" who won a surprise victory in a four-way primary in District 13, to the south. "My opponent," she said with national-stage charisma, "cares more about where I go to the bathroom than how you get to work!" Francesca, however, seemed to have little interest in low-stakes issues like the office vacancies on Manassas Drive. "We're literally fighting for our democracy," she said. "It's 'Handmaid's Tale.' "

We got out to canvass in a subdivision of modest flagpoled homes on branching cul-de-sacs. Francesca traipsed over people's lawns and rapped hard on doors. The hit rate with canvassing is always low, and over two hours on a hot and cloudless

Sunday, we encountered only half a dozen families at home.

In the few conversations Francesca did have, she was invariably friendly and polite, but her pitch about Reid was mostly that he was a great guy; every once in a while she remembered to say that he was in favor of full-day kindergarten districtwide or distance-based tolls on the Dulles Greenway. In her one extended interaction, a young mother began by saying that her family cared above all about full-day kindergarten. She had only ever voted in presidential elections, she admitted, but then managed, over the course of five minutes, to convince herself that she was wrong to do so.

"I don't vote in the local but I guess I really need to now," she said.

"Well, I was never out canvassing before, either!" Francesca said.

Some volunteers I accompanied were more careful to stay off lawns, or more fluent in the local issues, or had greater experience with the mechanics of political campaigns; some remembered that a "1" on the voter-information sheet meant most likely to vote for David Reid, while others were sure that great enthusiasm was recorded with a "5." On the record, they were always positive about their huddles and steering committees, even if off the record they wondered whether the welter of organizations meant duplicative or otherwise-inefficient resource allocation. No one, however, seemed frustrated by the fact that they reached only a handful of voters, or discouraged from making a return trip.

By the end of the weekend, more than 40 volunteers had knocked on more than 2,500 doors. Sorenson rarely allowed herself to be thrilled by anything, but she conceded some satisfaction that these were patently terrific results. This wasn't to say that everything had gone smoothly. When canvassing was over, Sorenson checked the campaign's email account to find a restrained but irate message from a community member, upset that his home's "no soliciting" sign was ignored. The volunteer stood and argued about the First Amendment. The voter leaned Republican, he continued, but had always voted on both sides of the aisle, and from what he knew about David Reid, he was interested. This encounter, however, had cost them his vote.

This didn't sound to Sorenson like one of her own people. She looked up the planned itineraries of one of the outside groups — an organization dedicated to voter-suppression issues — and found that it must have been someone from its camp. Sorenson wasn't sure there was much she could do. "They have a different list, and a different script, and different priorities. We tell our people in training not to get into constitutional battles, but each group does its own thing."

The interaction was, Sorenson thought, a bummer, but she couldn't afford to dedicate any more time to it just then. She had email to answer, and as she took out her phone, I looked down at mine. There was a news alert that the Supreme Court had upheld part of Trump's travel ban, and I read it aloud. At first Sorenson didn't seem to know what I was talking about. Then she said: "Oh, *him*. I can't even worry about *him*. I can't even think about *him*." She was late for another call, this one with the group that had the wrong compliance box on their folksy print-at-home postcards. It lasted an hour.

It is never easy to assess a campaign's progress, particularly one that is likely to be won or lost by a few hundred votes, but over the summer the Reid campaign appeared to have cultivated a meaningfully committed base, among local voters and elsewhere. A San Francisco group called the Sister District Project, which pairs volunteers in deeply blue or red districts with campaigns in purple ones and had quickly become one of Sorenson's most useful and beloved allies, had helped them set up an Amazon Wish List. Now far-flung supporters could buy them toner or printer paper. They handily outraised Delegate Greason for the month of June — $53,000 to his $39,000 — with five and a half times as many total contributions and 12 times as many grass-roots donors. Greason was still up $36,000 in cash on hand, but there was almost certainly enough time to close that gap, especially since the Reid campaign had raised enough money to hire a finance director, a young woman who had worked on the Ohio senatorial campaign; she would save Sorenson countless trips to the Post Office and the bank. On the third weekend in July, Sorenson was working from home when she checked the campaign's Facebook page and saw a photo of some 30-odd canvassers, 20 of them from the group that had done the campaign's website. "I was like, Holy cow, you usually see those

numbers later in the year." By the end of August they'd visited 32,556 doors. The House Democratic Caucus looked at their stats and decided to award them two additional paid positions.

The major development was an unexpected shift in the dynamics at the top of the ticket. The governor and the state's two senators were Democrats; the pipe dream for November 2017 was to bring the State Legislature into line. In August, however, the Republican gubernatorial candidate — a former lobbyist, R.N.C. chairman and all-around establishment figure named Ed Gillespie — hired an erstwhile Trump campaign operative and reinvented himself in the president's image. He began to speak out against the removal of Confederate monuments and in favor of the travel ban. He spoke about the danger of "sanctuary cities," even though Virginia has none, and ran campaign ads about Latino gang violence that prompted a rare public rebuke from Obama.

It was hard to tell how this affected Sorenson's race, though the summer poll wasn't good; Reid was down by seven. But the race, Sorenson knew, was always going to come down to turnout. The weekend after Labor Day would hopefully set the tone for the fall, when, with any luck, the name recognition they'd worked to foster might begin to translate into voter commitments. When returning summer volunteers arrived, they found a more mature operation: there was a sign-in table in the entryway, three times the turnout and a campaign staff large enough for one person to do check in, one person to divide the turf and a third to guide the orientations.

Burnt Hickory Court in Broadlands, Va., part of Loudoun County. Brian Ulrich for The New York Times

Reid as a candidate seemed looser and more confident. He’d received recent endorsements from the League of Conservation Voters and the Sierra Club, and was willing to talk about more difficult subjects. “There’s some hesitation among people of color to put up yard signs” for a Democrat, he told a group of volunteers, “after what we’ve seen, down in Charlottesville and elsewhere, with the emboldening of white supremacists.” He did not seem like the sort of person who’d ever had reason to refer to white supremacy. He was, however, still making the same joke about giving an award to whoever had traveled the farthest to volunteer.

For canvassers, the script was slightly different in this phase of the campaign. They were now instructed to ask directly if the campaign could count on the respondent’s vote. The field organizer explained that if volunteers found themselves in a position to discuss Delegate Greason’s record in Richmond, they should mention that he missed more than 700 votes — 713, to be precise. A volunteer raised his hand to ask how many pieces of legislation actually came

before the delegates; he thought it would be more impressive to express Greason's absences as a percentage. Sorenson, at her computer, rolled her eyes. Once he left, she looked up. "I know exactly how many pieces of legislation came before the chamber, and I picked that number for a reason! We do *not* want to express it as a percentage."

For every volunteer who saw fit to challenge the campaign's authority or its expertise, however, there were half a dozen there for a political education. If everybody hated the tolls, more than one canvasser asked, why were they so high? Well, the campaign answered, the Australian firm that owned the Dulles Greenway had donated $8,000 to Delegate Greason. There was something about the modesty of that figure that got even distant volunteers incensed on behalf of the local community. The conflicts surrounding Trump's D.C. hotel and the emoluments clause were exasperating but remote in their immensity, whereas a $6 toll for a $2.29 bottle of milk was an affront you could grasp.

With 11 days to go before the election, their ground strategy shifted from the voter-commitment stage to the final get-out-the-vote effort; on the campaign's final Saturday, they enlisted 205 volunteers to go door to door helping voters articulate an explicit plan for when and how they'd go to the polls on Tuesday. The race, as Sorenson predicted, was going to come down to turnout on the margins: their tracking poll had them in a dead heat. Sorenson's estimate was that Reid needed 13,150 votes to win, and it was easy for her to imagine that the final tallies would be within the 1 percent margin that would trigger an automatic recount. With the race tightening, Greason sent mailers that described Reid as a radical leftist who had taken "tens of thousands of dollars from New York, Washington and California." Sorenson showed it to me and shrugged. "Well, that last part's true."

Sorenson was grateful for all the money and help from her outside volunteers, but what most moved her was when she felt someone had made the organizational leap from political fury to political identification. When one of her Sister District captains in Maryland asked for a yard sign, Sorenson furrowed her brow and asked her why she wanted one on the other side of the river. The volunteer simply said, "We need to expand what we think of as our own backyard." Sorenson didn't have a

lot of time for mawkishness, but that idea, she said, "is just beautiful to me." And she could appreciate whatever it was that got people newly involved in politics and kept them there. If Indivisible wanted to call Virginia "the first statewide referendum on Trump," that was fine with her, as long as they didn't set expectations so high that their support couldn't survive a disappointment.

Election Day was a dark deluge of hard, driving rain. Sorenson put on high green galoshes and met Reid at his polling place at 7 a.m., then sent him on a tour of polling locations to shake hands and take selfies. She went back to their staging location in the rec room of some dedicated supporters. Everybody seemed to have a different idle conviction about which kind of voter was most susceptible to the weather, but Sorenson screened out the chatter, sitting on a high stool in front of her laptop, an overheated phone in her hand. She left only to vote herself, and to check up on an alarming but ultimately false story she heard about an older supporter who'd had her ballot disqualified for no reason.

The foot traffic — not just the usual folks from D.C. or Maryland, but people who came from California, Florida and Iowa — was so steady that the campaign began to run out of clipboards. Volunteers would arrive, muddy and soaked, peel off their clear ponchos and hand over their unreadably macerated voter rolls. By midafternoon, they were almost finished with the fifth complete pass they'd done, over their 11-day "mobilization window," of all 10,000 doors in their universe. Most returnees declared that everyone on their lists had either voted already or was just waiting for a spouse to come watch the kids; some of them stopped Sorenson to tell her stories about how they took a moment at the end of their shifts to circle back around and check on these promissory replies, and more often than not they encountered "I voted" stickers. Then they'd be handed a new packet and sent back out into the rain. Someone in need of reprieve asked Sorenson when she planned to wrap things up for the day. "When do you stop? If your nearest polling place closes at 7:00 and is two minutes away, you stop at 6:58."

Sorenson didn't feel she could really trust the numbers that were coming in — turnout, she thought, couldn't realistically be as high as it seemed to be — but by 4 o'clock she could no longer ignore the fact that most polling places had already far

exceeded the totals they usually showed in off years. She dealt with her mounting anxiety by making new spreadsheets to compare precinct-level historical data and devoted her last hour of her campaign's last day to one final round of phone-banking to voters in what she worried was her one underperforming precinct.

The campaign party was at a favorite strip-mall wine bar. Sorenson went home to change, thinking she might have a moment to herself before the results came in, but by the time she and the rest of her team arrived, 90 percent of Loudoun's precincts were reporting. Reid's race was one of the first calls. He won with more than 17,000 votes, by at least 17 points. Shoals of well-wishers formed around Sorenson, touching her arms and shoulders and yelling through their tears. "You are so [expletive] awesome," one said. "You brought happiness back into our lives," said another.

Sorenson made her way through the crowd slowly and with only a small, hesitant, curious smile. Every few minutes the growing crowd reacted to new results. Wins at the top of the ticket brought sighs of relief, but the shouted announcement of each successive delegate victory triggered gasps and whoops of astonishment: the first Asian-American woman, the first two Latina women, the first out lesbian, the first trans woman, an African-American woman, even a woman in a Trump district; altogether at least 11 new Democratic women, seven from Northern Virginia alone, in a swell that seemed likely to result in 16 flipped districts for a tied House. Eventually Sorenson sat down with her finance and field directors — the three young women, Reid later proclaimed, who organized a legion of volunteers and brought them to victory — to eat some cheese; she particularly liked the kind of Brie they had there, which is why they chose the venue for the party. She stopped to read a congratulatory text from "Joe Biden's guy."

Her finance director looked over at her and asked, through a flood of tears: "How are you so calm? I feel like we've all been in our little bubble, but look" — she gestured toward the television overhead — "we're on MSNBC! How are you not crying?"

Sorenson just smiled her smile of mellow detachment, and finally spoke. "I just kind of want to throw my phone into the ocean."

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a writer at large for the magazine. He last wrote about machine learning and artificial intelligence.

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