

How Luke Bronin Captured The Primary



Mayoral candidate Luke Bronin talks Sept. 12 with a few people at a block party on Enfield Street in Hartford's north end. (Jon Olson / Special to the Courant)

By JENNA CARLESSO and VANESSA DE LA TORRE

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HARTFORD — When Mayor Pedro Segarra stormed out of the Democrats' nominating convention in July, moments before the party endorsement went to challenger Luke Bronin, he declared that he would take the fight to the streets.

But the battle may already have been lost in Hartford's North End, a key base of black voters where activists and neighborhood leaders say they have long felt neglected by city leadership.

Bronin, the first-time political candidate who scored a decisive victory over Segarra in Wednesday's primary, had reached out to north Hartford's most influential residents months earlier — in some cases, more than a year ago — and convinced them he was worth trusting.

No major African-American candidate had emerged to challenge Segarra, and several residents said in recent interviews that Bronin was willing to listen closely to their concerns.

"He wasn't an easy sell at the beginning," said Eric Crawford, a member of the Democratic town committee's 5th District in northeast Hartford that supported Bronin. People were initially skeptical of the 36-year-old white lawyer, who only recently moved to a city with a history of racial politics.

"Nobody knew him like that, to put him as mayor, to have that kind of influence over your community," Crawford said. "Who is he? Is he going to get in there and forget about us? Everybody knew the North End would take him over the top."

People who watched Bronin, a Yale-educated Rhodes Scholar, lay the groundwork for his campaign say he essentially did his homework: eating breakfast and lunch at North End establishments, hitching rides from strangers, stopping by cookouts and Jamaican bakeries, visiting neighborhoods with his wife and kids, making countless calls, and sitting for face-to-face conversations as his circle of contacts grew larger and larger.

Dianne Jones, a Harold Street resident, said Bronin contacted her in June after chatting with others in her neighborhood.

"He just said, 'I was told to reach out to you, that you work for the community and I'd like to see what your thoughts are,' and I laid them on him," said Jones, who later worked for Bronin's campaign. "He was very responsive. I believe he got it."

"He had to have worn out two pairs of shoes," said Lou Watkins, a former city councilman who is on the Democratic town committee, "because he did everything. He made a lot of personal contact with people in the neighborhoods. He went around this community, in a lot of cases by himself.

"He made people believe he was going to come back and listen to them again," Watkins said.

Steve Harris, a longtime North End activist who lives on Cleveland Avenue, said his community was tired of being ignored and Bronin tapped into that frustration.

"You get to a point when you ask yourself, why have we become so unimportant to our city government?" Harris said. "As Luke walked this neighborhood, I think he heard that from a lot of citizens, how we felt neglected and voiceless.

"For me, Luke resonated because he spoke about the things that were important, that no matter where you live in this city, the government will care about you."

Vote tallies gathered by The Courant Wednesday show that Bronin's largest support base was the North End, though he also garnered significant support from the city's downtown and West End sections, where Census data show large concentrations of white residents.

Bronin also won two precincts in the South End, the predominantly Latino base that steered most of its votes toward Segarra.

Segarra, 56, a five-year incumbent, has not announced whether he will run in November's general election as an independent. Bronin vastly outraised and outspent Segarra in the primary — garnering more than \$834,000 from a national network of donors and ensuring that "his message was heard," city Council President Shawn Wooden said.

But state Rep. Douglas McCrory, D-Hartford, who endorsed Bronin in August, was emphatic where Bronin's pitch was heard the loudest.

"The North End put him in office," McCrory said. "And I want to be clear about that. It is clear that the votes up in north Hartford were the reason why he won this election."

'Why Should I Trust You?'

Did it matter that Bronin is white?

"All politics is local, and of course race plays a part in every election," McCrory said. His wife, Foye Smith, who won the Democratic primary for probate judge, was part of Bronin's endorsed slate, which included several black candidates with ties to north Hartford.

When Bronin began his mayoral run, there was a perception of him "as a white candidate from Greenwich who wants to come in here and be a knight in shining armor who will fix the city," McCrory said. Bronin was largely raised in affluent Greenwich.

"That's the first thought. The second thought is, OK, now let me listen to his message," McCrory said. "My questions were: Why should I trust you, or why should my community trust you?"

Residents said Bronin put in the leg work, sometimes hitting the same homes twice or more on the campaign trail. He showed up to neighborhood revitalization group meetings and anti-violence vigils, along with reaching out to "every political person, or anybody who was involved in politics in the last 20 years," McCrory estimated. "Honestly ... there isn't a person he didn't meet."

Jones said Bronin visited every corner of the city, including streets that could be considered volatile.

"As time went on," Crawford said, "people warmed up to him."

Bronin also recruited several North End community leaders to do volunteer or paid work for his campaign. Voices of Women of Color, an influential consulting firm in north Hartford, was paid more than \$25,000 by the Bronin campaign to canvass for him, according to campaign finance records.

Bronin said he knew many community members before deciding to run for mayor, and expanded that network once his campaign got underway.

"Some of my earliest supporters were, really, I would say more community leaders than political [insiders]," he said. "It's been really important to me to reach out beyond just the political leaders, beyond just those who are typically engaged in the political process and try to get new voices to the table and new ideas into the campaign."

"I started out with just sitting down with folks who I thought would have insight or who are respected voices in their communities," Bronin said, "and having coffees and lunches and dinners and just getting their thoughts."

Segarra could not be reached for comment Friday. Jenna Grande, a spokeswoman for his campaign, said the mayor "worked so hard and invested a lot into the North End, but people have the right to exercise their vote and that's how the Democratic process works."

Segarra's campaign pointed to a number of city investments in north Hartford, including the Weaver High School renovation underway and the federal Promise Zone designation.

'The Door Is Open'

Bronin has begun to reflect on his first steps in office should he emerge victorious in November. In a city that is heavily Democratic, the primary outcome is often a harbinger of the general election.

City Councilman Joel Cruz Jr., a member of the Working Families Party, and Republican Ted Cannon are also running for mayor in November.

If he becomes mayor, Bronin said, he will "most likely" ask all current department heads at city hall to tender their resignations upon his arrival.

"Some of the most important questions, of course, are what your team looks like, so I'm going to begin thinking about that," Bronin said in an interview Thursday. "It's always been important to me to have a diverse team that reflects the city of Hartford, and it's important to me to have the best possible team that we can find."

His first priorities would be to address the city's projected deficit, launch his youth service corps — designed to put young people to work — and to stabilize the drop in police staffing.

Bronin, who has pledged to be "a mayor for all of Hartford," would also have to win over constituents and certain state legislators in the city's Park Street area and South End. State Reps. Minnie Gonzalez and Edwin Vargas, a former rival of Segarra's who battled him in the 2011 Democratic primary, backed the mayor in his re-election efforts.

"I'm going to be reaching out to individuals who I know were supportive of Mayor Segarra and seeking their advice and seeking their input just as I sought the advice and input of those who supported me," Bronin said. "They've got a seat at the table. ... Whether you supported me or not, their calls are being answered. The door is open."

Vargas, who on Wednesday night was urging last-minute voters at Kennelly School to reject the "Greenwich" candidate, said it was "disappointing" that the primary results largely fell along racial lines.

"From the very beginning, it seemed that the white community was very excited about Bronin, and then there was a lot of money spent in wooing the African-American vote," Vargas said Friday.

Now, he said, "We have to put aside whatever misgivings existed during the election ... for the good and welfare of the people of Hartford."

Courant Staff Writer Matthew Kauffman contributed to this report.