

## ...When *Every* Vote Counted

When Robin Young announced her candidacy for the Assembly in 1978, she promised to wage a “vigorous campaign” and “spend enough to win.” The city councilwoman from La Habra, in the northwest corner of Orange County, did in fact run an energetic campaign for the Democratic nomination in a district where the incumbent had announced his retirement.

Young was something of a child prodigy. She had been elected to the city council six years earlier at the age of twenty-two. At that time she was the youngest elected official in the United States. Young said she entered the 1978 race with her eyes open – “prepared for long hours, hard work, intense party in-fighting, endless fundraising” and becoming a virtual stranger to her family. But at the end of the primary process, she was left bewildered by voter apathy and local campaign rules, and she must have wondered what would have happened if she had knocked on just a few more doors.

In the days before cable narrow-casting, Young’s suburban district had no radio or television outlets of its own. Broadcasting was dominated by the Los Angeles stations, which made reporting or advertising unlikely or feasible. She said no nonpartisan civic group in the district offered to provide a public forum for candidates. No service club would permit a candidate to address it. She said neighborhood “coffee klatches” in her district ranged from a high of thirty-five to a low of two – the candidate and the hostess. Young noted that most people whose doorbells she rang “seemed genuinely annoyed that they had to get up off the sofa and walk to their front door.” One city in her district prohibited the distribution of leaflets in any public place unless the candidate paid a fee in advance. She said another city required a \$25 fee before any sign could be placed in someone’s front yard.

As difficult as Young found the campaign, the aftermath was even worse for her. It took twelve days for the county registrar of voters to complete the tally. Six days after the election, she clung to a two-vote lead, but by the end of the tally, Young had lost by ten votes. She had been outspent four-to-one by an opponent who had a paid campaign staff and paid \$2,250 for a recount that confirmed her razor-thin defeat. In response, she said the contest should finally put to rest voters’ lackadaisical excuse, “Why bother? My vote doesn’t count.”

Sources:

*Orange County Register*, Nov. 7, 2008, *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 17, 1978, *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1978, *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 1978, *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 7, 1978, Statement of Vote, June 1978.