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Davis and Abbott talk up Obama during GOTV rallies

President seen differently by gubernatorial hopefuls



Jason Fochtman, MBR

Republican Greg Abbott finds plenty of supporters Tuesday in Conroe.

By Patrick Svitek and Theodore Schleifer

October 21, 2014 | Updated: October 22, 2014 8:24am

President Barack Obama's shadow loomed over Wendy Davis' and Greg Abbott's get-out-the-vote efforts in the Houston area Tuesday, as the Democrat appealed to African-American voters critical to any coalition that would give her a surprise victory in the race for governor.

At a rally at Texas Southern University, Davis attempted to tie her personal struggles to the broader civil rights movement, saying the election presented a stark contrast for black voters. After the rally, Davis' campaign led a trip to a local polling place, where students could cast a ballot on the second day of early voting.

"If you believe like I do, that it's time to end this nonsense and stop spiting our president just to say no," she said to applause, "then go and vote."

Davis at times has kept her distance from Obama, who has weak poll ratings in Texas. The Democratic senator from Fort Worth must feature the president enough to motivate the black community in cities like Houston and Dallas, but not so much that she alienates the state's conservative voters in suburban and rural areas.



"I have been very pleased and proud to have the support of my president," Davis told reporters after the TSU rally. "I agree with President Obama that we ought to raise the minimum wage, that we ought to bring our Medicaid expansion money to work for us, and that women ought to be paid equally for equal work."

Abbott on 25-city tour

At the first gubernatorial debate in the Rio Grande Valley, Davis declined to answer when Abbott asked if she regretted voting for Obama in 2012. She clarified the next day that she did not.

Since then, first lady Michelle Obama recorded a radio spot for Davis, which is running only on black radio stations. Other ties to the president are the Obama operatives who lead and are enmeshed within Battleground Texas, an organization that effectively serves as the Democrats' field program.

Abbott aggressively has sought to link her to the president, often calling her an Obama "twin" who would pursue the same policies he has. The Republican currently is airing an attack ad against Davis that refers to "Governor Barack Obama" and keys off a recent remark by the president that his "policies are on the ballot" in November.



J. Patric Schneider, Freelance

Wendy Davis urges students to vote at a rally at Texas Southern University.

As Abbott launches a 25-city tour to get out the vote, he is not letting supporters forget Davis' ties to Obama and his allies.

"As we gather today, Barack Obama operatives are organizing across the state of Texas to turn out their vote," Abbott said at a rally in Conroe. "Barack Obama's national finance director, Barack Obama's deputy campaign manager and even Harry Reid's spokesperson is working for her," drawing boos as he named a list of Davis campaign officials.

"Democrats are working hard and he's using that to make sure our folks don't become complacent," said Jared Woodfill, former chairman of the Harris County Republican Party. "The reality is, this is a president who has not been popular at any level - national, state, local - and she understands that this is a weight around the campaign that will sink it."

Tough balancing act

High turnout among African-American voters is key for Davis' underdog campaign. Blacks cast about 14 percent of the statewide vote in the last midterm election in 2010, but Democratic groups like Battleground Texas have made increasing their turnout rate a priority this cycle.

On Tuesday, Davis continued to attack Abbott, the attorney general, for declining to answer a hypothetical question from the Express-News editorial board about whether he would have defended a ban on interracial marriage years ago.

Dallas Jones, a black political consultant in Houston, said Davis faces a tough balancing act.

"While I understand the black community's admiration of the president, I also understand that Senator Davis is running for governor in what is a very red Texas," Jones said. "She's embracing the president as much as possible while understanding the demographics of the entire state."

Jones, for example, said it was wise that the spot featuring the first lady is airing exclusively on black radio and not being heard on other stations.

Divided on strategy

Black supporters at Tuesday's TSU rally appeared divided as to whether Davis should focus on persuasion or black turnout in the final weeks.

Chip Thornton, a 64-year-old African-American supporter who attended the TSU rally, said that if Davis hugged Obama more closely, then the black community would be more energized.

"She should not abandon him or his policies. If she does, she does it to her detriment and she will lose," Thornton said. "If he came to Houston, the George Brown center would be packed with African-American voters. You wouldn't have no problem bringing them out."

Egberto Willies, a local Democratic activist, disagreed with that position.

"Black folk in Houston are sufficiently smart to understand what she has to do to win some of the disaffected white vote," Willies said of Davis. "Why would she, or any politician, embrace Obama?"



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