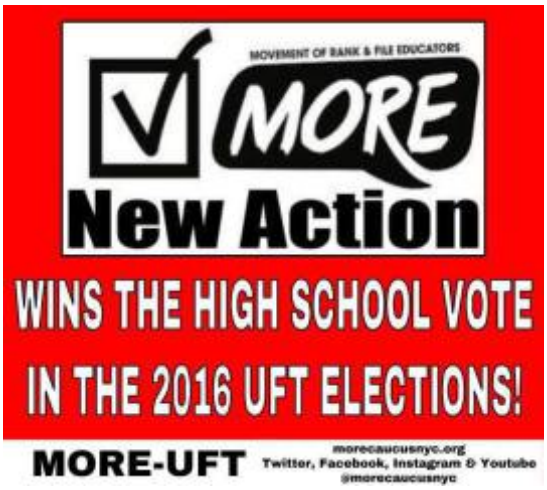
2016 UFT election results: Some Good News, But A Great Deal Of Work Still To Do

written by Kit Wainer | June 9, 2016



The good news is that the MORE/New Action slate won the seven seats on the UFT Executive Board elected by high school teachers. Furthermore, voter turnout increased across the board from roughly 18% in 2013 to roughly 24% in 2016. Finally, the absolute number of votes for the opposition increased in every division. However, still less than one-quarter of UFT members participated in this election. And the slight increase in voter turnout benefited the ruling Unity caucus at least as much as it benefited MORE/New Action.

Comparisons between the 2013 and 2016 are imprecise because of the complicated way in which votes are cast and because the UFT election committee changed the rules between elections to reduce the likelihood that votes would be disqualified. Nonetheless we can discern general trends by matching the two sets of results side by side. (To make such a comparison one must combine MORE's and New Action's 2013 vote totals and compare them with those of our joint slate in 2016). Among the active teacher divisions (High School, Middle School, Elementary). MORE/New Action increased its absolute number of votes. However, our relative share of the total vote did not change. In the Elementary division it remained at 24-25%. In the Middle Schools it remained at 31-32%. In the High Schools MORE/New Action's vote share actually declined slightly from roughly 54% to roughly 51%. It is difficult to know how Solidarity/Portelos votes would have gone had they not been on the ballot. Solidarity/Portelos received roughly 2.5% in the Elementary Schools, 6.6% in the Middle Schools, and 2.5% in the High Schools. If we believe – and this is impossible to prove – that Solidarity/Portelos voters would have chosen MORE/New Action had Solidarity not been on the ballot, then we can conclude that our vote share would have risen slightly in the Middle and Elementary schools and held steady in the High Schools. But, again, that would be speculation.

The increase in voter turnout was greatest among active functionals and that is where we took our greatest hit. Total functional votes increased by roughly one-third. Our vote share in this division declined, however, from 38-39% in 2013 to 22-23% in 2016. Part of the explanation for this might be the increased number of members now counted as active functionals: unionized charter school employees (including teachers), private sector nurses, home day care providers.

Overall, the news from 2016 was good. MORE/New Action won seven Executive Board seats and the opposition is more united now than it has been since 2001. But 2016 was not a breakthrough year

for us, at least as measured by relative vote shares. Rather, the 2016 results indicate that despite our efforts UFT members' consciousness has not changed substantially in the last three years.

The increased voter turnout also tells a mixed story. Voter participation rose by roughly one-third from 2013 to 2016. This is likely due to the efforts of the UFT Election Committee to increase turnout and to the efforts of each of the caucuses. The Election Committee agreed to send out a series of email and text message reminders, including links to the caucus statements and photographs of the ballot envelope. UFT District Representatives sent numerous messages to UFT Chapter Leaders urging them to get their members to vote and giving advice on how to do it. Both MORE/New Action and UNITY held pizza parties and chapter breakfasts in which members were encouraged to bring in their ballots. It should not be surprising that UNITY had an advantage in this area since it has so many more Chapter Leaders than we do. MORE/New Action utilized social media extensively to remind people to vote.

The results indicate that a variety of get-out-the-vote strategies can raise turnout somewhat. And since UNITY also benefited from the increased turnout, it is likely that we will be able to convince the Election Committee to pursue even more robust tactics in 2019, such as utilizing AAA's online voting options. However, that avoids the troubling question of why members don't vote. While it is true that the ballot is complicated and may discourage some voters, voting in UFT elections is far simpler and less time-consuming than voting in governmental elections. Yet a far higher proportion of our membership will vote this coming November than voted this spring. After the 2013 UFT elections I argued that low voter turnout was one of many symptoms of membership disengagement from the UFT as a whole. The cause has been a series of union concessions, such as those in the 2005 and 2014 contracts, which have made it difficult for many members to believe that the UFT is a force which fights for and defends their rights. And so they tune the union out. They don't care who runs it because they don't think it matters. So they don't vote. Apathy comes in degrees, however. Some are hostile to the UFT. Some simply don't think much about the union. Others care, but only a little, and have to be reminded several times to vote. This last category is the group that can be nudged by get-out-the-vote efforts.

In 2013 I also argued that membership disaffection threatened the survival of the UFT as a whole. Privately funded groups such as Educators 4 Excellence and Children First were raising money in an effort to slowly strangle our union. I worried that such low voter turnout would offer an opening to a hedge-fund sponsored decertification drive. Although the "reform" agenda has taken some hits since 2013, these organizations are still out there, still laying in wait. In fact, due to sheer serendipity, the UFT dodged a bullet with Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's death last February. In all likelihood, had Scalia lived, the high court would have struck down the agency fee system which allows unions to collect fees even from non-members. Had that happened, UFT members would have discovered that they had the right to resign from the union, save $100 per month in union dues, and get exactly the same services. Given widespread membership indifference to the union, it is likely that the UFT would have lost members rapidly and its size and influence would have declined sharply. Scalia's death postponed that. However, as UFT President Michael Mulgrew repeatedly points out, there are several other Friedrichs-type cases working their way through the courts.

While the 2016 elections offer some hopeful signs for the opposition, they also indicate that the UFT is still in peril. Part of our job is to build an alternative based on a vision of activist unionism and an active membership that can win the kinds of victories that can restore confidence in our union.

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Originally posted here.