



Interview with Mark Wiener, Thursday April 8, 2010.

Matt Davis: What makes you decide to get involved in a particular issue, as opposed to staying out of it?

Mark Wiener: “I don’t think I have any formal process. I’ve been fortunate that I’ve been able to work on things, that at the time, are the right thing to do or the right candidate to work with. I tend to work on things I think are the right thing to do, or where I like person, or where they’re things I believe in. I don’t have a flow chart or a matrix or anything like that.”

Broadly is it correct to define you as a “progressive?”

“I don’t know. I don’t go much for labels. I think what I think and I form opinions based on what the facts are. Certainly I work for Democratic candidates not Republican candidates and I work on progressive ballot measures so I think, yeah. But I’m not much for rigid ideologies. They make me nervous.”

Amanda Fritz says she would have hired you for her 2008 race for city council “if you had been willing.” But that you turned her down, and ended up staying out of the race entirely. Why?

“Well, I try to be careful about my bandwidth. You can’t take every campaign that comes down the pipe because if you’re over-committed then you don’t do a good job for anybody. I like Amanda and I met her a couple

of times, and I gave her a lot of advice for free. And I did end up voting for her, I think in the general, but yeah, nothing against her whatsoever.”

Why aren't you doing any consulting work in the race for Jeff Cogen's vacant county commissioner seat?

“That's not quite bandwidth. That's more that I know several people in the race and I find them to be good people and I didn't think there was one that rose so far above the rest that I wanted to get involved. The people in that district will have a tough choice, actually.”

Why didn't you get involved in the Potter/Francesconi race

“I had conversations with both of them. I met with Potter here early on—he was asking for advice, at the time he wasn't going to take any money from anybody. I said ‘you are going to have to talk to people.’ I've known Jim for a while, too. But that was just another one where I had a lot going on. If I'm not involved in a race and someone asks me my opinion, I'll try to give it. I'll try not to betray confidences or anything like that, but it's just another one that I didn't get involved in.”

Specifically, can you give some examples of where your consulting has diverged from the “status quo?”

“Boy, I'd have to pull a list out. I certainly think that working for Steve Novick was not the status quo. I've worked for a lot of legislative candidates with an entirely wide range of interests and experience. Some have a lifetime of experience, some, it's their first time running. It's just hard to generalize. I think, working with Erik Sten, for example, that was certainly not a status quo candidate. And when he was running for

reelection in his last election he was decidedly not the status quo candidate. Jeff Cogen had never run for office before. I don't know how one would characterize him on the whole continuum of status quo or change agent. I take people on a case by case basis. Everybody who runs for public office, which all of a sudden puts them into the category of people who are willing to do something quite unreasonable with their time, has their own set of strengths and weaknesses, or ideologies. I mostly try to focus on good people who are trying to do good things. John Kroger. There's another example."

What about your stance on charter reform?

"I think that the particular proposal that was forwarded was not a very good one. It aggregated far too much power in the office of the mayor. All systems have their imperfections, but the commission system does allow for more voices. It requires more push and pull on city council. You have to work harder with others in a commission form of government than in a strong mayor system. It's by definition the status quo because it's the system we have, but I don't think I'd be in for supporting a system that limits too much power in one person's hands. On balance I thought that was the wrong proposal."

Do you think you'll consult on the campaign about Voter Owned Elections issue in November?

"I don't know. I'm not crazy about it. Once again this is another example—if one believes that campaign finance generally is a problem given Buckley vs. Valeo and certainly the makeup of the Supreme Court, I think a robust campaign finance system is the only way of affecting things, currently. But

obviously when it got started this was a system that was written on the back of a napkin.”

What if the money comes from the Portland Business Alliance? Say they come up with \$2million for a campaign

“I try not to respond to things I haven’t been asked for. It would seem difficult to me to see that this is one I’d take on, particularly in a busy general election where other things are happening for me. I mean, presumably, this is something that will make the ballot.”

“He hates it when people lie to him,” says Randy Leonard.

“Yes. I’m trying to think what he might be talking about. Certainly not him. He’s honest as the day is long.”

You coached Beau Breedlove in 2008?

“Yeah, I think I was on the phone with him once or twice. I’ve never met the guy. That was big fun. After Sam told me what was going on and vigorously denied it, he said the other guy is fairly young and he’s got no experience with the media, and he’s going to get a lot of calls, so would you be willing to talk to him about how to handle the media. The first thing I said to him is the most important thing you can do is tell the truth. If you do not, you will be found out, and it will be bad. So I’m going to ask you is there anything to this story? And he flat out told me, no, it was not true, they did not have a sexual relationship. He flat-out lied to me.”

“So I gave him some very basic stuff: When reporters call, you may talk to them, but you don’t have a moral responsibility to talk to them. If they call

you, ask if you can call back so that you can collect yourself, and if there are questions which might come up, you should know what you want to say about them. For example there was a train ticket—so, you need to make sure the questions people are going to ask about the train ticket. And that was it.”

Will you continue to work with Adams if he runs for reelection in 2012?

“There’s a long time between now and then. He’s got to decide what he wants to do before anybody else decides what they want to do.”

What would it take to get you to drop a client?

“Well, I mean, in the context of a campaign that was currently under way, there’d be a fairly high bar. There’s the old Hollywood adage of maybe there’s creative differences. There may be a completely different view of what the proper strategy is. If a client did something that I thought was particularly unethical, that could be a factor. I can’t think of a time when that’s happened. You try to take those decisions as they come.”

What would it take to get you to drop a client outside the context of a race?

“If I genuinely thought that the other person in the race was better at the time, or somebody who I had an even more longer standing relationship with. Those are tough decisions but they don’t come up too often.”

Is there a line for you between election consulting versus lobbying on policy issues?

“Well, I made a decision a long time ago that I would not be a lobbyist, and I’m not. I help people get elected. And once they’re elected, if there’s some policy issue that comes up, and they call me, I’ll talk to them. I don’t lobby. I can’t say I’ve never called somebody and said ‘yo, what the fuck?!’ but that’s not because I’m trying to push for any particular outcome. But you read something in the paper about somebody you like and you call them and you say, hey, what’s up? I won’t say it’s unusual, and I’m not casting aspersions on those people who lobby for a living, but it’s a grey area I didn’t really want to get into.”

During Charlie Ringo’s campaign against Bill Witt for senate in 2002, you latched on to Witt’s commitment to major league baseball in the mailers. The mailers said school cuts have harmed our “kids, our community, and our future,” “and what was Bill Witt working on? He was leading the effort to spend \$150million in public money on a baseball stadium. Apparently, Major League Baseball held a little more appeal than solving the problems with our local public schools.” Replace the words “Baseball” with “Soccer” and “public schools” with “the police bureau,” and you have two of Saltzman’s biggest campaign weaknesses in a nutshell. Right?

“No. Not necessarily. First of all, once again, I try to take things on a case by case basis. I thought the deal being proposed for MLB was very different from the deal that has been struck for MLS. The issues surrounding them were very different. For example the deal for MLB, had it gone through, could well have reduced the amount of money available for schools. One of the things I appreciate about Dan is he stood up and said

“no urban renewal money” for this deal. So right there, if you just want to take the substance, they’re very, very different.”

You also called Senator Rod Monroe a “career politician.” Like Saltzman?

“Let’s see. I’m trying to remember what Rod did before he was in public office. My job as a campaign consultant, somebody who helps people get elected, is not to push or substitute my values or world view for the people I’m working for. Every race has different dynamics and the two or more candidates in that race have different strengths, weaknesses, outlooks. My job is to be able to help the candidate I’m working for express their views and the contrast between them and the person they’re running against in the most helpful way possible while also telling the truth. So certainly, different campaigns and different candidates might require different messages and different emphases.”

In 2006, a mailer you put out accused Senator Rod Monroe of anti-semitism following his race against the late Shirley Golds, back in 1988. Was that a mailer you’re proud of

“I don’t remember the piece but I doubt I accused him of anything. I may have quoted an article that was in the paper.”

“They quoted somebody anonymous who said something that I’d not said,” says Monroe.

“I quoted, I believe, a column by Steve Duin. And I used that quote along with a number of other quotes that had to do with Rod Monroe’s history. The irony is not lost upon me upon whose behalf that mail piece was sent—

not only with that candidate's approval but enthusiastic approval, because once again, my job is to help candidates deliver the message that they believe in and wish to forward."

It was a piece for Jesse Cornett, who says you "convinced me to sell my soul to the devil in order to win that race," that you had him "convinced that the only way to win was to go negative." Fair?

"That's certainly not my recollection about the process. I believe that he was quite pleased and enthusiastic about drawing the contrast. Having said that, from a strategic point of view, he was probably right. If you're running against somebody who is much more familiar to the electorate, who is either an incumbent or has been, you're probably not going to win without drawing some sort of comparison. That's just the physics of a campaign."

"Mark Wiener is the man in the shadows who's elected the majority of city council," says Cornett. Discuss.

"What is this, Coffee Talk?"

What's Coffee Talk?

"It's a *Saturday Night Live* skit. No. I have helped on the campaigns of people who have run for city council, and I guess that would be a majority of them right now. There's nothing I do that I think is particularly shadowy. I don't hide. I'm in the phonebook, and I don't try to influence public policy one way or the other. So it would seem to be to be a comment steeped either in ignorance or self interest."

“Mark Wiener is a total ass-fucker,” says a political insider who has worked with Wiener in the past. “Don’t cross the man. He’s the one person in this business you don’t want to cross, because he knows everybody and he knows everyone. There’s nobody and nothing that is not beyond his reach. He is somebody to keep on your side.”

“Well. Unless the person who said that had his or her tongue firmly implanted in his or her cheek, I would say that’s a great misapprehension of my role.”

Have you advised Dan Saltzman on his recent strategy toward the police bureau?

“I mean, certainly, we’ve had conversations about the issue. I don’t know that I’d say I’ve advised him on a recent strategy. I’ve known Dan for a long time, we talk about a lot of stuff.”

What about when you stood in the back of the room in January 2009 for the launch of “Operation Cool Down.” Where was that on the consulting/lobbying line?

“I think I was there because Dan said hey, I’m going to announce this thing and if you had time I wouldn’t mind if you came by and told me about how we did.”

How did he do?

“I thought he did well. It’s sort of an example of Dan having an engineer background. His tendency is to work the problem instead of working the politics, and I thought this was an example of working the problem. Trying to get a little more cross jurisdictional cooperation, trying to get a little bit

ahead of what everyone thought was going to be a long, hot summer. And if I recall correctly, he changed the way some of the gang intervention worked in a way that was much more targeted and smart.”

But you were there to work the politics?

“No, actually, I was not there to work the politics. When Dan was on the county commission and I worked for him, he put a lot of time and effort into putting together a regional approach to youth violence. And I was very involved on a staff level in talking to people up and down the I5 corridor on gangs and the like, and worked a lot with the African American community here, and I think it was based on my experience with Dan and his long-time interest in reducing gang violence that I was asked to be there. I think it was more of a policy thing.”

So there is sometimes a crossover in that you’ll talk to people about policy?

“Well I’ll talk to people about policy. My first job in politics was policy. I’ve worked inside government at the local government level, at the congressional level and the state level. People might find it shocking, but I do have a background in public policy and sometimes people find that perspective useful.”

Where do you draw the line in terms of what you’ll put in a campaign mailer?

“It’s got to be true.”

What about getting into someone’s personal life?

“Well, sometimes it’s hard to draw a line. The consideration of who gets elected or who you vote for is bound up in who a person is, so it’s sometimes hard to draw a bright line. I mean, I try to talk about things that are relevant to a person’s public service, or a person’s service in the position they’re trying to attain. So you try to strike that balance.”

You took \$20,000 from Martha Schrader in her latest senate run.

“They don’t let me near the books. She’s a long-term client, I’ve done work for her as a state senator and I worked for her as a county commissioner. But to be clear that \$20,000 doesn’t go to me. It goes to printers and graphic artists. I only wish that I got to keep all the money that was in those checks, and I wouldn’t have to do that. I wouldn’t have to drive my crappy car.”

And what car do you drive?

“A 2001 Honda Accord with, I think, 130,000 miles on it. And when the time comes it will deliver very little trade in value.”

So, how much do you keep? Feel free to tell me it’s none of my business.

“A.it’s none of your business. B.It’s hard to give a simple formula because we have different services that pay differently. If we buy television time, we get a percentage of the commission. If we do a mail piece, there’s a certain commission built into the piece. It’s very hard to generalize.”

So, 15%?

“Generally that’s a standard commission, but that 15% doesn’t come to me. The money is distributed evenly amongst different people who are providing services.”

What do you think of Martha Schrader’s voting record this special session? She voted against removing BPAs from baby bottles, and against tighter regulation for the banking industry, for example. Hardly progressive, is it?

“Once again, it is not my job or role or appropriate role to tell people how to vote or what they should believe. If you look back on the people that Martha Schrader has run against or have run against her, I’m thoroughly comfortable that she was, for example, a vastly better choice than Tootie Smith for Clackamas County Commission. Every election is about a choice between two people and I do try very hard to pick the person who, I think, is better. And that also is in the context, of, I think it’s very, very important that the Oregon Senate continues to be under democratic control, because we’ve seen what happens when the legislature is controlled by the other party. And I think Martha Schrader will give us the chance to see that the overall progressive agenda has the chance to get enacted and I think that’s important, too.”

“Mark pushes the effective messaging without it coming back to the people he works for,” says a campaign expert. You’re the undisputed “king of the negative mail piece,” according to several of my sources. Is that fair?

“You know, I think elections are about a choice, and voters deserve to know the good, and the bad. So that they can make an informed choice. If

you were running against somebody who has a public record of decisions or positions that would be detrimental to the future or just bad positions, you can be fairly well assured that that candidate won't be talking about them. So if voters are going to have an informed choice, they need to have reasons to vote for somebody, and they need to have reasons to vote against them. And I have, sometimes, been called upon to make the invidious comparison, but I always work hard to make sure it is factual, and if possible, use a bit of humor. And humor helps. I don't know who it is that said it never comes back onto them—the point isn't to be mean. The point is to illuminate. And if you have to illuminate something that some people would consider to be comparative, or even negative, do it with a little humor. Make the point, or at least not in a way that is so harsh that people will only see the harshness of it and miss the point you're trying to make.”