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Amish PAC turns its sights to 2018 with help from Newt Gingrich



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer May 29, 2017



This billboard paid for by Amish PAC was in the 300 block of South Seventh Street in Akron. Seventh Street in Akron is Route 272.

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The unprecedented effort to “unlock the Amish vote” in 2016 isn’t finished with the election of President Donald Trump.

Amish PAC, [launched last year](#) by conservative Republicans with ties to Newt Gingrich and Ben Carson, has begun fundraising again with its sights on the 2018 midterm elections.

Organizers say they want to build on a successful start last year.

“Pennsylvania was the state that put Trump over the 270 electoral vote threshold,” Gingrich, the former House speaker and presidential contender who was born in Harrisburg, wrote in a fundraising email last week. “And there is no question that every single Amish vote made a difference.”

Previously: [PAC director: At least 500 Lancaster area volunteers primed to drive Amish to polls](#)

While it’s unclear how many members of the Plain community the political action committee was able to register and get to the polls, Trump’s narrow victory in Pennsylvania means every vote played a role, committee co-founder Ben King said.

Now, the small band of about four Amish PAC organizers is putting together its plan for 2018, the next critical federal election year in which Republicans will try to maintain control of the Senate and House.

Was Amish PAC successful?

In 2016, how much of the Amish vote actually contributed to Trump’s 44,300 margin of victory in Pennsylvania remains to be seen.

There are about 35,000 members of Lancaster County’s Plain community, though roughly half of them are under the voting age of 18 and very few of those eligible have traditionally voted.

Steve Nolt, an Amish expert at Elizabethtown College’s Young Center, said he has just begun a project looking into how the Amish voted in Lancaster County compared to previous years.

“They could relate to his style, his philosophies. He put a lot of sweat equity in that company. Did he do everything perfect? Of course not, but nobody does.”

Committee co-founder Ben King

It will be the college’s first similar project since a 2007 study of George W. Bush’s re-election in 2004. In that year, a locally organized effort led to a spike in Plain voter registrations and to 63 percent voter turnout for the community in Lancaster County. That amounted to 1,342 voters, just 13 percent of the adult Amish population in the county at the time.

Nolt said it’s too early to speculate how many more Amish registered and voted — and why they did so — last year, but so far the anecdotes they’ve heard are all over the map.



Plain & Growing: Amish population doubles every 20 years, now totaling 300,000 in US and Canada

“(We’ve heard from) people who consciously did not vote because they were so upset with the Amish PAC effort to try to get them to vote, and then we have anecdotes of those who never voted before but did because of the Amish PAC,” said Nolt, who estimated his report will come out later this year.

King, a former Amishman who grew up in Leola, said he believes the group made an impact in informing the Plain community about the candidates and getting them to the polls on election day.

King said the Amish community, like all of Trump’s base of support, was mixed between those who were enthusiastic about the candidate and those who were strictly opposed to Democrat Hillary Clinton.

For the enthusiastic crowd, King said it was Trump’s business experience that made him stand out in the Plain community.

“They could relate to his style, his philosophies,” said King, who runs his own contracting company. “He put a lot of sweat equity in that company. Did he do everything perfect? Of course not, but nobody does.”

Fundraising, looking ahead

Gingrich, in the fundraising email this week, wrote that Amish PAC is committed to supporting Trump by “turning out a hard-to-reach but vital part of the electorate in states we need to win in 2018.”

That includes Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana, the states with the largest Plain populations and where Democratic senators will be up for re-election.

King said the fundraising pitch was the first step in trying to plan how the Amish PAC can support conservative candidates next year.



Amish PAC launches newspaper ads to introduce the Plain community to Donald Trump

It was also the first time the former speaker has been directly involved in the group; one of the PAC's co-founders is a former top aide to him.

But even without Gingrich's direct involvement last year, the group appeared to have little trouble with donors.

Amish PAC raised nearly \$169,000 in the six months of 2016 in which it was active, according to financial disclosures. That's about four times the \$41,000 organizers originally planned to raise when it launched.

Of the donors who were recorded publicly (personal information is recorded only if the total amount donated is at least \$200), just 15 percent of them were from Pennsylvania. The next-largest contributors were Florida and California out of the donations that came from 41 total states.

The group spent nearly \$140,000 of what it raised, though only a fraction of that was used for billboard and newspaper advertising purposes, which organizers originally said was the purpose for the fundraising.

For newspaper ads in Lancaster Farming and other local publications, it spent \$13,670. About \$2,650 was spent for ads in two Ohio newspapers, and about \$17,440 was spent on billboards locally and in Ohio.

The majority of the rest — \$74,382 — was disbursed to a Virginia-based organization called Omega List Co., which provides direct mail lists.



New PAC looks to get Amish vote for Donald Trump