

Experts: Gamoian's tough-on-crime approach worked in Fresno County judge's race

By Pablo Lopez

Rachel Hill had all the right credentials to be a judge: A Notre Dame law degree, civil experience from a big Fresno law firm, and prosecutorial experience with the Fresno County District Attorney's Office. She also was an adjunct law professor.

Republicans and Democrats — and a majority of Fresno County Superior Court judges — gave her hundreds of thousands of dollars to spend on billboards, campaign signs, and television, radio and newspapers ads.

And when her opponent, Fresno prosecutor Lisa Gamoian, attacked her, Hill stayed the course and touted her credentials, hoping to sway undecided voters.

Hill, however, couldn't overcome Gamoian's message to voters: that she would be tough on crime.

That strategy, political experts said Wednesday, was apparently enough to put Gamoian ahead by 2,869 votes when all 577 precincts were finally counted early Wednesday. There are approximately 42,600 absentee and provisional ballots still remaining to be tallied in Fresno County.

"Rachel ran a smart campaign and worked hard, but Lisa Gamoian is the right fit for Fresno County voters," said Minnie Santillan, who was Hill's campaign consultant through the June primary.

Santillan, who started a political consulting firm in Sacramento about six years ago, said Wednesday that she and Hill parted on friendly terms after the June primary. Santillan was replaced by Julie Griffiths, who has 25 years of experience as a political consultant.

Before she left Hill's team, Santillan said she and Hill had talked about Gamoian's strategy. She said they both agreed that she could never convince voters she would be tougher on crime than Gamoian, especially since Gamoian has spent her career putting violent criminals in prison for life or on California death row.

"Rachel did a good job, but Fresno is the home to Three Strikes," Santillan said, referring to the 1994 law authored by Mike Reynolds. "She knew she was up against a formidable opponent."

Gamoian, 56 and single, was born in Selma on a raisin farm and still lives there. She portrayed herself as an outsider, fighting the status quo legal system that she described as lazy and not in tune with the public.

Hill, 51 and married to Fresno County Superior Court Judge Jon Skiles, was the darling of the legal community, promising to work as a team player if elected as a judge.

Paired against each other, they turned Fresno County's lone judicial race into one of the costliest, nastiest and most hard-fought ever. The total war chests spent by Hill and Gamoian will likely top \$1 million, observers say.

Hill still has a shot to overtake Gamoian, said Fresno State political science professor Tom Holyoke. "But it will be an uphill slog," he said.

Holyoke said Gamoian billing herself as Fresno's No. 1 homicide prosecutor and touting her 24 years with the Fresno County District Attorney's Office played well with voters. Her supporters, which included the Fresno Police Officers' Association, Fresno Deputy Sheriff's Association and several other law enforcement unions, also helped her.

“People in this community love law enforcement,” Holyoke said. On the other hand, he said, “I’m not so sure they are enamored with the legal community.”

Gamoian ran a tough, aggressive campaign that included attacks on Hill’s credentials and calling her “a liberal activist jurist who will legislate from the bench.” Gamoian’s ads also said Hill “does not share our values and beliefs.”

Holyoke said party membership probably didn’t play a big role in the judge’s race. But he said voter apathy toward judges likely favored Gamoian.

Gamoian’s attack ads also had little effect on Hill’s campaign. He described them as silly, since the ads said Hill, if elected, would mess with the Valley’s source of water. “State courts have no authority over the water issue,” he said.

What resonated with voters, Holyoke said, was Gamoian portraying herself as a tough prosecutor. “In this community, people have a concern about crime, so it played out well for her.”

Neither Hill nor Gamoian could be reached to comment Wednesday, but Gamoian’s campaign consultant, Tim Orman said Gamoian’s tough-on-crime campaign worked perfectly.

In the days leading up to Tuesday’s election, Orman said Gamoian saturated the market with radio and television ads. Three Gamoian ads played an average of 16 times per day from Friday to Sunday, and 12 times per day on Election Day for a total of 500 commercials on 10 local radio stations, he said.

Gamoian also paid to have her television ad play 290 times from Saturday to Tuesday. Of the 290 ads, 119 of them were played on Fresno’s four big television affiliates. Gamoian also ran ads on a wide variety of Comcast and U-Verse cable channels, Orman said.

“There also was a a substantial presence on the Internet and banner ads on FresnoBee.com,” he said. In addition, Gamoian ran full-page color ads in The Bee on Saturday and Sunday and two on Tuesday.

Hill kept a heavy presence in The Bee and on radio. But she didn’t do television in the final days, her campaign consultant, Julie Griffiths, said.

One Gamoian ad in particular played to voters’ security concerns. It featured the family of A.J. and Danny Hernandez, who were shot to death in May 1994. Gamoian prosecuted Jerry Rodriguez for the crime. Rodriguez is on death row.

Orman said that ad resonated with voters because it featured real people affected by crime. The ad showed that Gamoian honestly cares about victims, he said.

Gamoian’s campaign team thought of the idea Wednesday night, hired people to film it Thursday and gave it to television stations on Friday, Orman said.

Griffiths said Hill tried to overcome Gamoian’s tough-on-crime approach by “staying positive on the issues and showing her strengths with her résumé.”

But from the moment the precinct ballots were counted Tuesday night, Gamoian took the lead and never gave it up.

“Rachel is not ready to concede. We’re still optimistic,” Griffiths said. “We’re hoping the trend changes.”

Contact Pablo Lopez: plopez@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6434 or [@beecourts](https://twitter.com/beecourts) on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>