

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT
SCHOOLS
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**HOW ANGRY KENTUCKY PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS
REPLACED A ‘TRUMPIAN’ GOVERNOR.**

Frustrated educators said: "always believed we could shock the world" by ousting Gov. Matt Bevin. But "it was still kind of shocking when we did it."

Australian teachers, particularly those involved in the “Fair Funding Now” campaign should take heart from the recent replacement of Republican Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin by Democrat Andy Beshear. Kentucky was and still is a red or Republican state, so how did this happen?

The political victory was in large part the work of Kentucky’s mobilization of angry public school teachers in 2018.

What has Happened in Kentucky?

Travis Waldron and Kevin Robillard reported in the [Huffington Post](#)

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A public school employee ,Nema Brewer, sparked Kentucky’s mass mobilization of [teachers](#) in 2018. when thousands of educators responded to Bevin’s proposed changes to public pensions by calling in sick and [shutting down Kentucky schools](#).

Bevin has spent four years mimicking President [Donald Trump](#)’s bullying approach to politics. He has turned his ire on nearly anyone who questioned him, and the anger he inspired in so many Kentuckians seemed to turn Tuesday’s election into a referendum on the governor, so much so that he was [the only Republican](#) on Kentucky’s ballot who failed to win.

But in a red state like Kentucky, where Trump is popular and the GOP is, too, beating Bevin was never going to be easy. It took nearly perfect circumstances in the Bluegrass State — and required a candidate, a party, a campaign and an energized grassroots movement working in concert to take advantage of it.

And it needed teachers.

Bluegrass Roots

The campaign to oust Bevin began on a blustery, cold day in April 2018, after the governor and Republicans in the state legislature forced through changes to an overburdened public pension system for teachers and state workers. [Decades of teacher frustration](#) over cuts to public education budgets [erupted into massive protests](#) in Frankfort, the state’s sleepy capital

city, as thousands of red-clad educators, many of them locked out of legislative proceedings inside, swore to “remember in November” and drive Republicans out of office.

The protests, which followed [a similar outburst in West Virginia](#), were initially organized in a Facebook group called KY 120 United, which teacher organizer, Brewer and another school employee had set up to link teachers in districts across the state. Its membership ranks swelled to nearly 40,000.

A [record number](#) of Kentucky educators launched bids for public office during the 2018 campaign cycle, many with eyes set on state legislative seats. The teachers scored some early wins, but overall, 2018 was a bit of a disappointment. Republicans retained supermajority control of the state legislature, despite the best efforts of Democrats. The teachers tried not to get discouraged.

“We’ve been singularly focused on Matt Bevin for a year and a half,” Teacher organizer, Brewer said.

Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin wants a canvass of the voting results from Tuesday's gubernatorial elections.

So, too, has Beshear. Always Bevin’s most likely opponent in 2019, the son of popular former Gov. Steve Beshear used his post as state attorney general to antagonize Bevin, particularly [through lawsuits](#) that attempted to block some of the governor’s biggest priorities. Beshear quickly allied himself with the teacher movement, greeting them on the steps of the capitol during the protests and taking up their cause. He [sued Bevin](#) to block the implementation of the pension bill, and in December, the Kentucky Supreme Court [ruled](#) in his — and teachers’ — favor.

As the governor’s race began to heat up in 2019, the teachers helped set the agenda in the Democratic primary, focusing the race on public education in particular. Beshear, who had chosen high school assistant principal Jacqueline Coleman — an original KY 120 United member — [as his running mate](#), won the primary in May, and turned his attention toward the fall election against his archrival.

The teachers were ready, too. The experience of 2018 left Brewer feeling like they had “gotten our sea legs a little bit,” and were more organized and prepared to boost Bevin’s opponent.

From that point on, the teacher movement, which included other public workers and labor unions [from the beginning](#), and Beshear — along with a Kentucky Democratic Party [hell-bent on not losing again](#), after ugly defeats in 2015, to Bevin, and 2016, when Democrats lost [a centurylong grip](#) on the state House — formed something of a symbiotic relationship that benefited them both.

Beshear wanted to focus the race on economic issues, like Bevin’s [cuts to public education](#), his targeting of public pensions, and his [attempts to end](#) Kentucky’s embrace of Medicaid and Obamacare. Beshear showed an uncanny ability to stay on message, but the teachers also made that easier. The prominence of their issues in the race weakened Bevin’s attempts to go after Beshear on social issues like abortion, and turned what Bevin wanted to be a national referendum on Trump and impeachment into a fight over local issues.

When Beshear argued that Bevin was [a bully](#) who broke with Kentucky's more polite politics, the teachers provided a relatable face of who, exactly, [Bevin had targeted](#).

“Everybody has a teacher they can look back on and say they helped them and made a difference,” said David Patterson, communications director for the Kentucky Education Association. “And those people decided that this drumbeat of denigrating and attacking teachers wasn't going to fly.”

And when Beshear, whom statewide Democrats have hailed for running one of the most organized campaigns in Kentucky history, needed an army of volunteers to help turn out the vote, the teachers were there. Nearly 1,000 educators volunteered for Beshear's campaign, Patterson said.

Beshear and the state party knocked on more than 1 million doors during the campaign, and ran a get-out-the-vote operation that helped turn out voters in deep blue areas of the state, like Lexington and Louisville, and in rural counties. The teachers, meanwhile, staged election events in nearly all of the state's 120 counties, Patterson said, and ran their own canvassing efforts.

“We knocked on so many doors, Brewer said. “We had people who'd been out for months knocking on doors. We sent text messages. We made phone calls to friends and family. We had days of action. I've never seen so much engagement from people who'd never done it before.”

And in the end, the teachers allowed Beshear to aggressively expand the political map. One of the most impressive feats of Beshear's campaign is that he managed to appeal to both progressive-minded base voters in the big blue cities and more rural areas of the state that typically favor Republicans, seemingly without compromising on issues that normally terrify Kentucky Democrats. (Beshear supports abortion rights and some [limited](#) gun control measures.) Beshear ran up a 100,000-vote margin over Bevin in Louisville, won numerous counties in the Appalachian coalfields, and flipped suburban counties in [northern](#) and western Kentucky where Democrats had struggled to make inroads before.

Early on, his campaign believed it could contend in those areas, and conservative educators, angry over Bevin's targeting of teachers, helped: Some even [canvassed for Beshear](#) just three years after voting for Trump.

I've never seen so much engagement from people who'd never done it before. Nema Brewer, public school employee and teacher organizer

There are any number of factors that change a statewide race that's decided by 5,000 votes, and any number of groups that may have made the difference: Beshear and his campaign, a revitalized Kentucky Democratic Party, the Democratic National Committee and Democratic Governors Association — both of which poured late money into the race while leaving the particulars to locals who knew where it needed to be spent best — and the activists on the ground.

But after Beshear won on Tuesday, seemingly everyone reserved praise for the teachers. Beshear thanked them in his victory speech, and multiple Democratic officials used the same descriptor to describe their impact on the race.

“They were huge,” said state Senate Minority Leader Morgan McGarvey.

Brewer, meanwhile, said this election was the first time in her time as an organizer “that the grassroots was really accepted in the process. Instead of us being the agitators, we were a part of the conversation. And I really commend the Beshear campaign for that.”

A ‘Repeatable Strategy’

The immediate aftermath of Beshear’s somewhat shocking victory in a state Trump won by nearly 30 points just three years ago led to searches for national meaning, even in a race defined by its distinctly local flavors.

Republicans downplayed any national implications of the loss. The party held on to two state legislative districts that were up for grabs, and actually won control of two statewide offices Democrats had long held. Daniel Cameron, a former aide to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, won the state attorney general race — an office Democrats had held for more than 70 years. And Republicans took over the secretary of state office. Those victories, they argue, show Bevin’s loss was about him more than any broader problems for Trump or the GOP as a whole.

“Only Bevin lost, but one bad apple did not spoil the bunch,” Scott Jennings, a Louisville-based GOP strategist, wrote on Twitter.

Many Republicans were reluctant to fully engage in post-defeat soul searching, noting Bevin was still contesting the race. In the campaign’s final days, the party increasingly worked to nationalize the race and inject culture war topics into the state’s electoral bloodstream.

“President Trump and Gov. Bevin are making Kentucky great again,” a narrator said in one of the final ads from the Republican Governors Association. “But socialists in Washington want to impeach Trump and take us backward. Andy Beshear is part of their radical resistance.”

As the narrator mentioned impeachment, images of Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez appeared onscreen.

And on Monday night, Republicans flew in Trump himself to make the case for Bevin. (“If you win, they are going to make it like, ho hum. And if you lose, they are going to say Trump suffered the greatest defeat in the history of the world. You can’t let that happen to me!” Trump declared.)

Everybody has a teacher they can look back on. And those people decided that this drumbeat of denigrating and attacking teachers wasn’t going to fly. David Patterson, Kentucky Education Association

The move made sense — Trump remains popular in the state, and polling showed more than 60% of Kentucky voters oppose impeaching the president. But Democrats suggested Trump’s

campaign rally may have backfired in cities like Louisville and Lexington, where voters detest the president and huge margins voting for Beshear helped doom Bevin.

“His showing up probably energized Democrats as much as it did Republicans,” Self, the Kentucky Democratic Party chairman, said. “While they had folks sitting in an arena, we had folks knocking on doors. And one of those certainly affects an election more than the other.”

National Republicans argued that their strategy of nationalizing the race was effective — Beshear’s negative ratings from voters rose slowly throughout the campaign — but simply wasn’t enough to convince conservative-leaning voters to put their personal dislike of Bevin aside.

National Democrats, meanwhile, were touting Beshear’s narrow focus on economic issues as a way the party could triumph in other red state gubernatorial races.

“He was able to cut through that national noise. When Bevin was talking about impeachment and Donald Trump, he was talking about things that matter to people in their daily life like health care and education and roads,” said Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo, chair of the Democratic Governors’ Association. “This is a repeatable strategy.”

Regardless, Beshear’s victory will have a major impact on Kentucky, where he has pledged to boost funding for public education, [raise teacher pay](#) and overhaul the school board Bevin stocked with his own appointees, many of them [hostile to public schooling](#). Beshear plans to end Bevin’s efforts to roll back Kentucky’s Medicaid expansion, which he said will protect health care for 95,000 Kentuckians, and [restore voting rights](#) to 140,000 convicted felons in a state with one of the country’s highest rates of disenfranchisement.

“It was an amazing night for working people in the commonwealth. It wasn’t just teachers,” Brewer said. “A lot of people want to make this a referendum on Trump, a referendum on impeachment, a referendum on McConnell. For us, this was a moment to slam the brakes on a really bad governor.”

https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/kentucky-teachers-matt-bevin-andy-beshear_n_5dc361aae4b03ddc02eec69a?ri18n=true

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