

The Stranger's Grip on Seattle Primaries — and the First Crack in It

A preliminary analysis of the anti-Stranger and Lefty Cheat Sheet campaigns in the 2026 primary

Dear supporters.

This is a preliminary writeup of the impact of the results of the anti-Stranger + pro-Lefty Cheat Sheet campaigns in the closing days of the 2026 primary campaign. In writing this, I've consulted heavily with two STEM PhDs who both have significant relevant statistical expertise, although the writing and any mistakes are certainly my own. I am also consulting with an additional PhD data scientist, who is providing me with larger scale relevant data on past elections. This may figure into a future update as well.

I am sharing this analysis with you now for two reasons.

First, to show you that your efforts were not in vain. You not only made a difference with your efforts, you made a difference that uncovered a path to consistently making a significant difference in the results of future primaries in Seattle. That's spectacular and bigger than any candidate winning.

Second, to show you that there is a way to end this madness with the Stranger.

There are pockets of people around Seattle discussing how to take these and related insights and turn it into something that impacts our general election and future elections to come. Insofar as I see an opportunity for you to further this impact, I will likely reach out and ask for your support—financial or volunteering. I want you to start thinking a bit about that now.

Here it is

Introduction

It is well known in political circles that the candidates that make it through Seattle primaries are almost always those endorsed by The Seattle Times on the right and by The Stranger on the left.

However, it seems to be underappreciated just how powerful these two endorsers are, particularly The Stranger. For the progressive side of the primary, it's been more like an ironclad rule.

To my knowledge, there is just one exception in living memory that proves the rule—Teresa Mosqueda. Only one candidate made it past the primary without The Stranger's endorsement, and that was nearly a decade ago. The circumstances were unusually favorable for her: she was (a) a generational talent in Seattle, (b) had a significant resource advantage over her opponent, and (c) had significant independent expenditures on her behalf from labor in the primary.

This means that hundreds of candidates in nearly as many elections, attempting a wide range of strategies to outmaneuver the rule, have failed to do so—including many with substantial resource and grassroots-support advantages. So when people say The Stranger is “influential” or “the King Maker” or “worth \$X in campaign spending,” they are vastly understating it.

The Stranger decides which candidate gets the plurality of progressive votes and makes it through the primary.

The centralization of power has long vexed progressives, as has the idiosyncratic nature of some of their endorsements. But The Stranger had been at least reliably progressive—that is, on the side of progressives fighting to challenge the establishment— when there were candidates available to do so.

At least until its purchase by Noisy Creek in summer 2024. The [investors](#) behind Noisy Creek are largely undisclosed. The only known individual investor is married to the Chief Legal Officer of Amazon, to whom their lobbying arm almost certainly reports. The “Publisher,” Brady Walkinshaw, who put the group together, is an [establishment figure](#) with a history of ethics violations.

After six months, they fired the Stranger's entire political team. The amount of political coverage from their staff declined precipitously, with uneven quality. And this July, this loss of political knowledge showed up in their endorsements. Gone was the steady support of viable progressives. In a surprising number of Seattle legislative races in particular, they opted for establishment figures, moderates, or centrists. Some of the more anomalous picks are also known to have personal relationships with the publisher, though whether this figured into the process is publicly disputed by the union.

I have an obvious stake in this race. I was the lefty challenger to an incumbent, who is himself a progressive. In my race, The Stranger picked the centrist challenger, of all people. But mine isn't the only race where the opportunity for a leftward shift was spoiled. And with The Stranger's monopoly on the left side of the primary, this is one of the most critical structural considerations for Seattle's progressives.

This is why, in my own race, I chose to publicly point out the problem with The Stranger. Other candidates did so as well, as did advocates and grassroots groups. One of these grassroots groups created the “Lefty Cheat Sheet”, attempting to offer an alternative for those estranged and dismayed by The Stranger buyout and behavior.

All these efforts formed in the final days of the primary campaign, and were unlikely to change the final outcomes. However, many have wondered whether there was some impact that should be followed up on and expanded in future elections.

Now that the data for the Seattle legislative races is in, we have some basis for judging whether the last-minute campaign against The Stranger and the grassroots effort to spin up the “[Lefty Cheat Sheet](#),” impacted the margins in these races.

(The short answer is, “yes.”)

In the final couple weeks of the primary, two relevant campaign messages emerged. One pointed to The Stranger buyout, institutional shift, and change in values and behavior. The other offered a new vehicle, the “Lefty Cheat Sheet” as an alternative.

Most often, these messages were mixed together by various actors, which makes analysis more difficult. And because there is no gold-standard randomized control trial available here, the data is not purely conclusive. And every race is different - variance in candidate quality, resources, public opinion, turnout, and the mix of candidates competing for the same voters in each race, make baseline comparisons difficult work. Still, after consulting with people with real statistical training, I'm convinced there is a strong suggestion of significant impact, especially given how late these two messages emerged.

First: the 46th Legislative District, historically

First, let's take a historical look at the 46th legislative district—my own district.

In 2022, there were four candidates that ran very strong campaigns for the State House in the 46th, as well as one other candidate that didn't get a lot of traction. Of those four, Rave was understood to be the moderate candidate and, unsurprisingly, landed The Seattle Times endorsement. The three others—Connolly, Taylor, and Farivar—all competed vigorously for The Stranger's endorsement. One difference between that race and this one: all three were genuinely progressive candidates. Also of note—this was before the buyout and transformation of The Stranger. It was also an open race, with no incumbent, and more candidates. So it obviously not a perfect comparison.

Still, the results are interesting. Farivar had the least resources of the three lefty candidates by a fair margin, though she had a very strong door knocking operation. Taylor* had the momentum going into the endorsement, with support from most of the grassroots groups and labor, along with a significant door-knocking operation. But the Stranger endorsed Farivar. Farivar's gain between election day and the certification of the primary was 4.4 points. Taylor stayed flat, Connolly lost a little over a point, and Rave lost 2.5 points.

This doesn't tell us too much about the overall *magnitude* of the Stranger's overall impact on the share of voters going to the endorsee, other than remind us that it is decisive, as always. But it does tell us something about the magnitude of its impact on *later voters relative to earlier voters*. Farivar gained 4.4 points, and everyone else was flat or down. This late “progressive” shift has, historically, been a “Stranger shift,” and nothing more.

But in my own August 2026 race, I gained 3.14 points, and no one else (including the Stranger endorsee) gained anything. This suggests that the campaign against The Stranger and for the Lefty Cheat Sheet together likely had a significant impact on the late breaking vote in my race. Insofar as the 2022 baseline race was predictive, and given that the Stranger endorsed Dreher, he should have gained 4.4 points and I should have stayed flat. Instead, he stayed flat and I gained 3.14 points. Adding 4.4 + 3.14 points, this suggests a net impact of the anti-Stranger + pro-Lefty Cheat Sheet campaigns changed the late vote shift by 7.54 points in my favor.

Second: a comparable City Council race

Second, let's look at a recent local city council example from a similar, overlapping region in Seattle.

In the 2023 District 5 Seattle City Council primary election race, which is a smaller electorate usually and so another imperfect comparison, The Stranger endorsed Christiana ObeySumner. This district has significant overlap with the 46th Legislative District. ObeySumner had a very significant resource and door knocking deficit relative to the progressive frontrunner and was seen as a longshot candidate in the general election.

Still, The Stranger endorsement was decisive (putting ObeySumner over the top on the first day), and ObeySumner gained 3.03 points between election day and the close of vote counting. The four other progressive candidates' vote shares all stayed flat, just as in the 2022 race above. Three very progressive candidates with similarly low-resource profiles to the Stranger endorsee earned between 1 and 5% of the vote, totaling about 7%. (This may give some indication of the staggering total magnitude of the Stranger's impact, as ObeySumner had 21.38% of the vote on election day).

That year's well-resourced previous progressive frontrunner, Nilu Jenks, lost 0.2% of the vote share after election day (this will be similar to the Brown example below—another progressive that didn't get The Stranger). Adding $3.03 + 0.2$ points, that meant a net 3.23 point shift between the former frontrunning progressive and the progressive Stranger endorsee. Compare that to the August 2026 race, where the non-Stranger endorsee (me) gained 3.14 points. Adding $3.23 + 3.14$ points, this suggests a total difference of about 6.37 points in vote shift from the anti-Stranger + pro-Lefty Cheat Sheet campaigns.

Together these analyses suggest something like a 6 to 7.5 point change in who got the late vote bump, due to the two last minute campaigns.

Third: a natural experiment on the Lefty Cheat Sheet alone

Third, we have a natural experiment for the “Lefty Cheat Sheet” message by itself. There were three legislative races, wholly within Seattle, where viable candidates were challenging incumbents from the left. All three electorates were receiving some anti-Stranger rhetoric.

- In the 37th, progressive Tatiana Brown challenged Chipalo Street from his left. Street was an incumbent House member, but he was competing to move to the open Senate seat. The Stranger selected Street over Brown.
- In the 43rd, Hannah Sabio-Howell's campaign, which launched with an “on your left” video, was another populist challenger, this time to the longtime incumbent Senate President, Jaime Pedersen. The Stranger picked Pedersen.
- And in my race in the 46th, I mounted a grassroots-heavy progressive challenge to longtime incumbent Gerry Pollet. (Pollet is, however, further left than the other incumbents.) In any case, The Stranger picked a third candidate, Will Dreher, whose

stances and financial support structure put him squarely to the *right* of both Pollet and myself.

The natural experiment** emerges because even though The Stranger made anomalous picks in all three cases, the Lefty Cheat Sheet was equivocal only between Brown and Street because endorsing groups were split 50/50 and Lefty Cheat Sheet's aggregated pick was thus “NO MAJORITY”.

This makes the Brown-Street race a *kind of “control group,” with Sabio-Howell and me as intervention groups. In all three cases, the progressive/insurgent candidates were passed over by The Stranger for someone to our right. Voters in all three races heard anti-Stranger messaging. But in Sabio-Howell's and my cases, the Lefty Cheat Sheet clearly favored us, whereas in Brown's case, it did not clearly favor either candidate.

The difference in our post-election shifts is stark. The “left shift” that happens with late tallying votes didn't materialize for Brown. But it did materialize for Sabio-Howell and me.

In fact, Brown lost a little bit of vote share to Street (0.24%). Sabio-Howell and I both increased our vote share by 5.68 and 3.14 points respectively, for an average of 4.41 points of increase. Adding 0.24 + 4.41 points, this suggests that the Lefty Cheat Sheet nod was worth about a 4.65-point vote shift, assuming the Brown race is a fair comparison*** to Sabio-Howell and me. Bear in mind that those 4.65-points is just the *gain* to for Sabio-Howell and me against our opponents. Our opponents also had to lose 4.65 points from their vote totals, for an even larger net swing.

Fourth: measuring the combined effect

Fourth, and finally, we have another natural experiment for measuring the total reduction in The Stranger-driven late shift due to the anti-Stranger plus Lefty Cheat Sheet effect.

The Brown vs. Street competition was in the same district as the Tewolde vs. Tomiko-Santos race. In that district, The Stranger did pick the insurgent challenger (Tewolde) against the incumbent (Tomiko-Santos) and so did the Lefty Cheat Sheet. With both The Stranger and Lefty Cheat Sheet pushing in the same direction, Tewolde shifted up 5.79 points after election day. And recall that Brown declined by .24%. This suggests that the total impact of the anti-Stranger + Lefty Cheat sheet messaging on the post-election day swing was 6.03 points, similar to the range of results from my analysis of the 46th District.

What this adds up to

The late shift in Seattle to progressive candidates has been, for as long as most folks can remember, “The Stranger shift”. Those progressives who do not win The Stranger's endorsement generally do not gain vote share after election day, no matter how progressive they may be.

However, this year, the campaign against The Stranger's influence and the rise of the Lefty Cheat Sheet changed this for the first time. This suggests that the two campaign messages—one

meant to shift voters away from The Stranger, the other to shift them toward the Lefty Cheat Sheet—likely each had a separate impact, and a substantial combined impact.

This fits with anecdotal evidence. In my own campaign, we found very high receptiveness to messaging about the corporate buyout, the change in staff, and the change in pattern of endorsements. Very few voters we talked to expressed strong loyalty. Rather, they expressed longtime reliance and dismay at the news, but readiness to switch given the message.

It also fits with traction online. Most political messages in Seattle do not generate more than a few thousand views. Three online videos generated over 40,000, 60,000, and 70,000 views, and I know of a total of close to 300,000 views on directly related organic content in a short period of time.

Several factors worked against these results, which actually makes the apparent effect more notable. Some of the loudest anti-Stranger messaging came from my own campaign, and a passed-over candidate is an inherently imperfect messenger—a dynamic that should weaken the effect relative to non-candidate messengers. Advocates also had very little time to work with: the messages that became the two dominant narratives emerged only about ten days to two weeks before the primary, well after voting had begun. Resources devoted to these campaigns were modest, many target voters live in secured apartment buildings that are difficult to canvass, and the underlying voting habit is decades old. Even with all of that working against it, the data still suggests a shift of at least several points tied to these campaigns. On balance, this indicates that an early, significant and sustained effort to displace The Stranger—particularly one built around an aggregator like the Lefty Cheat Sheet—would likely succeed.

It is notable that the overall vote share of the progressives passed over by The Stranger was still quite low. None of us got The Seattle Times endorsement. Brown and Sabio-Howell's opponents got both papers. My own race was even more unusual: a relatively progressive incumbent with a history of community advocacy earned The Times endorsement, while a centrist challenger funded mostly by out-of-state money earned The Stranger's. Adding to the confusion - my own “negative” campaigning in the 46th District likely harmed my opponent Dreher, but also likely harmed my own numbers relative to the incumbent.

In any case, the modest overall magnitude does not mean the campaigns were ineffective. They did not gain traction until a large share of the voting had already occurred. And once they did, they generated a pretty stunning change in how late voters shift their votes compared to early voters. A successful campaign to change ingrained voter behavior and reliance on The Stranger would likely need to start long, long before voting, and may take several cycles.

But it would be very promising.

Notes

** Taylor as frontrunner is an imperfect comparison to me for a number of reasons, especially given that she had both a lot of labor and grassroots support (whereas in my race, an*

incumbent captured most but not all of the labor support). With that being the case, and her vote share being flat, that suggests she would have done better than me at a baseline (and in fact, she did do better than me!), which suggests the impact is some-amount-greater than that 2.6 point shift indicates. On the other hand, Taylor was running against a bona fide progressive in Farivar, and Dreher is not a progressive. This undermines some of Taylor's relative advantage, blunting the magnitude of that “some-amount-greater-than-2.6-point-shift” impact.

*** It's not perfect, by any means. There are other meaningful differences between Brown's race and the other two. But it is not clear which direction these differences point, and they may be self-canceling. (e.g., Brown vs. Street was a smaller dollar race. But Sabio-Howell was outspent by the largest factor, and I by the second largest amount). An imperfect experiment, but provocative nonetheless.*

**** One way or another, the fact that the late-breaking shift moved away from Stranger endorsees and toward Sabio-Howell and me suggests that some combination of the anti-Stranger campaign, the Lefty Cheat Sheet campaign, and The Stranger endorsees' vulnerabilities with progressives significantly affected the late-breaking vote.*

***** One other possibility is that this year produced highly anomalous results simply because the Stranger endorsees (Pedersen and Dreher) were highly anomalous—more precisely, centrist—relative to their progressive challengers (Sabio-Howell and me).*

While these picks were certainly a break from past Stranger behavior, I don't think this explains the results above. In this theory, voters spotted it themselves and the messages weren't the cause. While I appreciate it taking voters seriously, it doesn't accord with the results. Otherwise, the early results would have also shifted, and they didn't appear to do so at all. The overall magnitude of vote shares would have looked quite different if voters were largely picking up on the centrist bona fides of these Stranger endorsees. Other races with centrists versus progressives in the region, where The Stranger endorsed as it typically has, show that voters were ready to pick progressive candidates regardless.

This suggests that The Stranger's anomalous endorsements in Seattle confused voters and produced anomalous results, but that the short, lightly funded, anti-Stranger + Lefty Cheat Sheet messaging eroded The Stranger's influence.