

Consultants' Corner

October - November 2005

Opinion: The Merits of Polling Early in an Election Cycle

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With more than a year to go before the next election, why would a prospective candidate even think about polling now? Campaign managers and their candidates need to make key fundamental decisions now. There are four main reasons to poll early, and each has a specific audience for the results: to test the waters, check the opposition, raise money, and position the run.

Testing the Waters

The first question that every campaign needs to answer is whether or not this is the right person in the right race at the right time. This polling needs to be done for the candidate early enough so a decision can be made to run or not. Share the the results first only with the candidate.

Most candidates want to win, not place or show. So the goal of the first poll is to find out if your candidate's profile matches up with what voters might support. This poll can be claimed as "testing the waters" under federal election law. The poll can be paid for before an official candidacy is declared, which might save your client from embarrassment should the results come back overwhelmingly negative.

Answering these questions honestly, before the candidate fully commits is key to building a campaign plan. Is the district ripe for a Democrat or Republican switch? Which issues are on the minds of voters? Would they be open to a businessperson or someone who has worked in government? Does it matter to the electorate if the candidate has challenging personal issues? If the candidate is not

someone voters want you can walk away knowing that you have fully tested the waters.

Checking the Opposition

Once candidates have made the decision to run, the campaign team needs to understand who they are dealing with on the other side. The results of the poll need to help the campaign team come up with a plan for victory. It needs to focus on who the likely opposition is, how well known that person is, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and whether or not they might be vulnerable to your candidate. There are an endless number of questions that can be asked and much of it needs to be based on opposition research. Incumbents are relatively well known, so their warts are more easily visible than upstart challengers. If they have a record, you can challenge it. If they have positions, you can debate them. And if they have done some questionable actions of a more personal nature, you will have to test for backlash.

The important thing to remember is that anything checked in a poll had better be well sourced, or you will have commissioned a “push poll,” which will be a problem with donors, the media and voters you are trying to reach.

Raising the Cash

Campaigns are expensive and without fund raising, it will be almost impossible to win. Honest fund-raisers will tell you that the most important factors donors take into consideration is a reasonable expectation of victory. First, the donor believes he or she can make a difference; why help lost causes when there are other candidates who share their beliefs who have a good shot at winning? The second is that many donors want to be able to have some connection to the candidate for the opportunity to pitch an issue later.

A strong showing in an early poll, directed to donors, will help. The key questions to ask are: what are the incumbent's re-elect numbers? If you are running against an incumbent, this is the entry question to the fund-raising call. If the incumbent is under 50 percent they are considered vulnerable and therefore you have a chance to win. If you are that incumbent and you are under 50 percent, then it is an appeal for assistance.

Next you want to see what the name identification is for your candidate. Before voters can choose your candidate they need to know the name. Even if the candidate has never run for office, name ID might be high because he or she is well respected in the community or a strong business presence.

Finally, you must test the head-to-head match-up. How does your candidate perform early, before any speeches have been given or media bought? Donors view this as the floor and anticipate you will do better.

Positioning the Run

Polls are quick snapshots of the electorate. Even the best ones cannot predict what the landscape will look like when it really counts. Early polling can help a candidate craft not only the rationale and strategy for the campaign but the story line as well. Journalism is rooted in sourcing that is often qualitative (what some people say), so reporters appreciate quantitative information (what a lot of people say). Despite a well-publicized drop in preference for mainstream media, they still have more credibility with voters and donors than your paid advertising.

Good news from early polls can become good news stories. Long-time incumbents who are vulnerable are news. Shifts in party identification are news. A candidate who is within 10 percent or 15

percent more than a year ahead of the election is news. A significant shift in issue priorities is news. Donors read political news, and if you are getting the goods early, they will write larger checks earlier. Voters who are most likely to show up on Election Day are also watching stories develop from the beginning.

Conclusion

Early polling is not only preferred, it is essential to making decisions of whether or not to run, how to run against an opponent, what to say to potential donors, and how to shape the early storyline on your campaign. Most of this early polling can be done in two waves – a relatively inexpensive vulnerability poll which can answer the questions of viability and strategy, and a more substantial benchmark poll which can help raise money and awareness. The earlier you know the better you can plan to win.