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LRR Focus: Fifteen Ways to Avoid a Loser; Keeping Your Campaign on Track

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LRR Focus: Fifteen Ways to Avoid a Loser; Keeping Your Campaign on Track

Abstract

[Excerpt] What's wrong with this picture? You and your union work hard. You invest thousands of dollars and hours in a campaign. Yet your candidate gets clobbered. Or even worse, your candidate wins and either pretends he or she has never heard of you or whines about every piece of legislation you mention.

Here are some proven ways to make sure you can get the most bang for your political bucks and make sure you aren't forgotten after Election Day.

Keywords

organized labor, campaign finance, politics, election, labor movement

LRR FOCUS: Fifteen Ways to Avoid a Loser: Keeping Your Campaign on Track

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Here are some proven ways to make sure you can get the most bang for your political bucks and make sure you aren't forgotten after Election Day.

1. Don't be afraid of long shots, but choose your races carefully.

Before you jump into a race, take a good hard look at political performance. Plenty of labor and teacher organizations have successfully defeated powerful opponents with long-shot candidates. Just ask the former President of the West Virginia Senate, the former Speaker of the Indiana House of Representatives, or senior legislative committee chairs in Maryland.

However, there are some districts so partisan they are simply not winnable short of your opponent suffering a crippling scandal.

If you have a Democratic candidate, look at past average Democratic voting behavior in that district. If it's below 45%, be very careful. If it's below 40% and you don't have insider knowledge that the opponent's about to be indicted, run away.

Don't be fooled by voter registration percentages. If these were meaningful, Herbert Hoover would have been the last Republican President. The Democrats have out-registered the GOP for decades. Actual average Democratic performance in past elections is the only reliable guide.

2. Aggressively recruit candidates to run.

Don't wait until a candidate comes to you. Go out and find people who will be good, high-energy candidates and encourage them to run. Let the candidate know what money, volunteers, and services you will provide. Recruit and finance early enough, and you can scare away potential primary opponents.

3. When you contribute money, exercise control over how it is spent.

Get involved in the race. Be involved with developing the budget, campaign plan, and message. Before you contribute, get an idea of how it will be spent. Ask to see the graphic design, read the copy for the brochures, direct mail, radio, or television. Don't just give cash; make

sure the candidate puts your money to good use.

Candidates, especially those below the Congressional level, love to waste money. They squander it in one of two ways:

First, they spend it too early, before the voters are paying attention. Ideally, candidates should reserve two-thirds to three-quarters of their campaign funds for the last three weeks, when voters actually begin to focus on the race. Making a lot of noise before then is like marching a band up Main Street at 3 a.m.

Avoid significant overheads, large paid staffs, or the temptation to run “early media” that leaves your budget drained for the home stretch.

Second, candidates love to waste money on things that don’t move votes. Avoid costly gizmos like kitchen magnets, shopping bags, or hats and tee shirts unless this stuff is sold for a profit. At best, these items can help with name recognition, but they don’t convey any compelling information about why people should vote for the candidate.

4. Have a written contract with your candidate.

Tired of hearing a candidate complain that labor did not live up to its promises? Put your commitments and expectations in writing, signed by the candidate. This way, nobody can say you didn’t come through.

5. Make sure your candidate has a realistic campaign plan and budget.

Candidates who fail to plan, plan to fail. Make sure your candidate has a written campaign plan that includes a realistic fundraising strategy, a compelling message, and specifics about voter-contact activities.

Most candidates overestimate both how much money they will raise and the numbers of committed volunteers they will have. They also underestimate how much time something takes and what it will cost.

Urge the candidate to prepare three budgets: one based on the best estimate of what the candidate will realistically raise, and two others which forecast a 25% surplus or deficit. This way, you and the candidate will have a thoughtful strategy that considers late-breaking financial windfalls or shortages.

If a candidate has not prepared a plan or will not let you prepare one that she or he will stick with, don’t waste your time and money.

6. Seize the most cost-effective medium and prevent your candidate from trying to do too much.

Campaigns have a variety of valid, valuable media to communicate with voters. Few candidates can afford to make a real splash using all

available forms of voter contact. Candidates often use too many forms of voter contact and end up not making any real impact. They knock on a few doors, phone a small percentage of voters, send out a couple pieces of mail, and run a few ads on TV or radio.

Figure out the most cost-effective medium, taking into account who your candidate is and the district he or she is running in. Then, focus the lion's share of the time and money in that medium. If it's direct mail, budget for five to 12 pieces to persuadable, likely voter households before you spend money on anything else. If it's door to door, make sure you have enough time and volunteers to get to those voter households at least twice.

Dominate the most cost-effective medium, then put money into the next most cost-effective until you dominate that one too. Keep on going down this chain until you run out of resources. This way, your message will penetrate and sink in.

7. Make sure your candidate invests in research.

Too often, candidates want to pinch pennies when it comes to survey and opposition research.

Good polling is essential for developing a powerful message and making sure it will work. Knowing what voters think is also the only way to learn what potential negative attacks on your candidate might draw blood and require an immediate response.

You can often save money by setting up a phone bank staffed by your members. Contract with a pollster for sampling, questionnaire design, and data analysis, then execute the poll internally.

It's well worth spending \$10,000 or less on polling to know whether \$50,000 worth of media or direct mail will work. Moreover, the cost of a poll can often be recovered by showing potential contributors your candidate has a decent chance. Conversely, releasing great poll numbers often shuts off your opponent's money.

Make sure your candidate has good opposition research, too. Otherwise, when your opponent goes negative on you five days before the election, you won't have anything to throw back.

You can also save money and build internal expertise by hiring opposition research experts to teach your activists how to do it in the future—and then offer this service to your candidates.

8. Make sure your candidate targets persuadable, likely voters.

Every campaign has time and financial constraints. Candidates often spend too much time preaching to the choir. Shore up your base early and concentrate most of your efforts in precincts where people are likely

to vote (focusing particularly on those with a history of voting in two of the last three elections); are uncommitted; and where there is a lot of ticket-splitting between parties. These people are persuadable.

Use past election statistics to target the precincts with persuadable and swing voters. (Finding likely voters is easy in states with computerized voter registration records.) Forget the areas with high GOP performance—you'll never win them over. Then you can concentrate your turnout activities among likely voters in high-Democratic precincts.

Again, remember that people are persuaded only when your message is heard more than once. You need to figure out the most cost-effective way to reach likely, persuadable voters five to seven times.

9. Donate activists to campaigns.

Let your endorsed candidates know you can provide a specific number of campaign workers for special projects. It's a no-cost way of making an impact. This way, a candidate can count on 20 people to help with a Saturday literature drop, or the staffing of a phone bank.

You can also exercise control—the candidate gets the volunteers for the literature drop only if you participate in the literature design.

Have your activists wear special shirts or buttons. This way, you make sure the candidate knows your activists are there because of your union, not through some personal attachment.

10. Consider in-kind contributions.

Donating important services like printing, silk screening, or phone banks can be more value than cash. First, you have control over the quality. Second, the candidate may be more aware of your efforts. Third, it can be less expensive, especially if you can get a wholesale rate from your suppliers based on the volume of several campaigns.

11. Consider independent expenditures.

After losing his bid for reelection, President Millard Fillmore's concession statement was a gracious "God help the people, for they can no longer help themselves." Like Fillmore's constituents, candidates too often don't listen, no matter what you say.

So, sometimes the only way to bail out a candidate is to get a message to the voters totally independent from the campaign. Labor organizations have effectively bypassed poorly run campaigns by doing their own polling, message development, and message delivery to the voters whether through paid ads on radio or TV, sending direct mail, making phone calls, or sending volunteers to the voters' doors.

Independent expenditures can be especially valuable in states with very low limits on PAC and individual campaign contributions.

12. Be sure to send persuasive messages to your own members.

As you know, most of your members and their families share the same concerns as the general electorate. In important races, contact your own members five to seven times to tell them why the candidate's victory is important. Broaden your message beyond traditional labor issues to include the salient topics *du jour*, such as crime, taxes, and a healthy environment.

13. Keep in touch after the candidate wins.

After the campaign, don't give your victorious candidate the chance to forget you. Elected officials often make the mistake of concentrating on expanding their bases while forgetting to reinforce their existing relationships with the people who got them there.

But instead of complaining that an elected official doesn't know you anymore, pick up the phone and invite him or her to lunch. Ask the person to attend a union gathering, and give the officeholder an award or favorable attention in your publication when they do something good.

14. Money and activism go together.

A recent study shows PAC contributors are especially likely to volunteer to work on campaigns and make grassroots legislative contacts. They give money because they understand the relevance of the political process. They want to be involved and make a difference. Moreover, while you should solicit money from all union members, your activists will be more inclined to make PAC contributions. Take advantage of this synergy.

And don't forget to thank and recognize a contributor!!!

15. Know what you want from party contributions.

If you support party organizations, know what you want from them in advance and ask for it.

Do you want a certain number of complementary tickets to future fundraisers? A table in the most central location in the banquet hall? Your local union president always listed as a sponsor for future events? A certain number of delegate slots to the state or national convention? The party chair's commitment to talk with your legislature's Speaker or committee chair on your behalf? Make your deals before you hand over the check.

Although following these 15 steps won't guarantee you victory, at least you won't sit passively back watching a dismal candidate go down the tubes—along with your money and your volunteers' time.

Labor has played a central role in politics for more than a century. The history of 20th-century social progress is the history of the American labor movement. If we do politics right, there is absolutely no reason why labor can't chart the history of 21st-century social progress as well.

—Gary Nordlinger

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