

## Strategy Analysis (A Look at One Recent Race)



### This Month: Students Come First

After each election, the Strategy Group invests time analyzing what our campaigns did right and what they did wrong. We review what strategies and tactics were most effective in bringing victory for our clients. We also analyze other campaigns to pick up successful innovations to emulate or practices of which to steer clear. The major statewide campaign in Idaho for 2012 was the Student Comes First Referenda. Here are a few thoughts on why the reforms failed.

**Organization** - The seeds of the defeat for Students Come First were planted in 2010 when the Idaho Legislature passed the reforms. The obvious opposition was the Idaho Education Association and in the midst of the debate over the bills, the IEA and allies in labor mounted loud public opposition to the actually modest reforms. Proponents muscled through the bills relying on wide Republican majorities but failed to match the astro-turfed public relations efforts of the IEA. There seemed to be lack of any strategic plan to persuade the public as to the efficacy of the program. This gave the IEA, as an on-going political organization, the opportunity to mount the public relations offensive that generated the signatures for the referenda while the proponents seemed to do nothing to promote public support until campaign season over a year later. Starting early in 2011 alone the National Education Association, through its Idahoans for Responsible Education Reform, pumped almost \$400,000 into the state, laying the groundwork early for the campaign. In contrast, public disclosure reports show SCF proponents did not initiate operations until mid 2012, far too late to organize a strong ground game.

**Grassroots** - One of the characteristic of the pro-SCF campaign was a lack of almost any grassroots efforts. While the IEA created grassroots front organizations to demonstrate opposition in various constituencies and then campaigned, complimenting mass media with grassroots tactics (door to door, phone banking, social media), the pro-reform campaign did little grassroots organizing. Little was done to organize and utilize the thousands of rank and file Republican and conservative activists and campaign volunteers in Idaho. They relied almost exclusively on mass media advertising (broadcast, newspaper and direct mail) which, in itself, does little to develop a relationship with the voters.

**Identity** - If you run for statewide office in Idaho, an R behind your name almost assures victory. If referenda in Idaho could be tagged on the ballot by their partisan origin, SCF would have won. The fact this was a Republican reform in a prohibitively Republican state should have made this a no-brainer. Yet the campaign for SCF seemed to purposely avoid tagging it as a "Republican Reform." Among the print and broadcast ads we reviewed for our analysis, the only time we found a statewide ad even mentioning "Republican" was in a "paid for disclaimer" by the Idaho Federation of Republican Women. In fact the opposition was actually better in direct mail at identifying Republican opponents than the SCF campaign was at demonstrating Republican support. When low information voters went to the polls to vote against Barack Obama it was not obvious to them that also voting for SCF would achieve the same objective.

**Face of the Campaign** - When a candidate runs for public office the campaign is branded by the candidate's name and face. Voters require a human connection in politics. Referenda are more difficult since there is not a candidate for the voters to identify with. The IEA and their national consultants from the NEA knew this and highlighted the image of a young concerned mother in their campaign ads and material. She was the face of the opposition. The SCF campaign had no

consistent face to personalize the campaign - no person to vote for. They lacked a unified campaign narrative on who would be helped by SCF and hurt if it failed. The practically exclusive message attacking the unions failed because there was no specific image on who was endangered by the union efforts.

Our analysis of the campaign shows the success and failure of utilizing resources and opportunities. Proponents of SCF started too late, did not have an effective strategic plan, and left on the table their two greatest resources: touting a Republican reform in a dark red state and an army of grassroots conservative activists with no other statewide races for which to volunteer. Opponents in contrast started strong and early and brought to bear substantial resources.

## Big Picture Strategy

In 2012 Republicans took serious losses in what should have been a banner year for Republican pickups, considering the economy, the budget situation and the foreign policy mishaps of the Democrat administration. Failure to take the Presidency, loss of two seats in the Senate, fewer Governors and a drop off in the House showed the 2012 Republican strategy obviously did not work as planned. On our state level too, Republicans lost some key legislative seats and failed to defend the Republican education reform legislation from repeal by the Democrats and the teachers union.



In reviewing the results, strategy and tactics, we at the Strategy Group have concluded that Republicans have a "relationship problem" with the voters. The two-way connection with voters has broken down and the strategies and tactics relied upon for over a decade only exacerbate the problem.

Since the 2000 election, the Republican National Committee and the Republican apparatus has focused on an overall strategy based on technical production - force feeding information to votes through mass media advertising (TV and radio) "robocalls" and high-scripted mass phone banking, mass direct mail and then driving them like cattle to the polls. It is one-way non-interactive campaigning. It has not worked. In fact we saw voter turnout nose dive in the 2012 election, suppressed by negative ads and voter disconnection.

Republicans have failed to develop a "relationship" with the voters, turning from the interactive communication so masterfully practiced by Ronald Reagan. In contrast Obama's Democrat machine has taken the "relationship" at the center of the old urban political machines and refined it with social media and community organizing. They develop relationships with voters by identity politics, not only racial and class but also by sexual and victimhood status. They have created crises, designated perpetrators and developed relationships based on common cause against them. They have stage managed a "seductive" relationship with women and youth with orchestrated psychology-based tactics and rock concert conditioning techniques.

In contrast Republicans have failed to develop strong relationships with the voters, failing to engage in that give and take that enhances knowledge, acceptance and trust. Relationships with voters is