



M E M O R A N D U M

TO: INTERESTED PARTIES

FROM: GLEN BOLGER

RE: NATIONAL POLLING. . .AND WHAT TO DO IN YOUR CAMPAIGN

DATE: MAY 21, 2008

For those of you who have received a memo from me in the past several months, this is the May installment. It will focus on further detailing the problematic political environment, and what to do about it.

NPR National Survey

Attached are charts from a national survey that I conducted jointly with Stan Greenberg for NPR. The news in the survey is NOT the terrible political environment – you already are aware of that, and if you are not, please retire. The news is NOT that John McCain has a slight deficit when matched against Barack Obama, despite stronger support for McCain from Republicans than Obama gets from Democrats (see my April memo for why that is a challenge for ALL Republican campaigns). NOR is the news that voters are angry about gas prices and think the Democrats are better able to handle the economy.

Instead, the news is the four match-ups between the Republican message and the Democrats' message on the key issues of the economy, Iraq, trade, and taxes. The Democratic message consistently won out over the GOP message by eleven to 25 points (the specific wording for each is in the attached NPR analysis).

Also noteworthy since the last email analysis is that the GOP lost our third straight special election, as Democrats flipped another seat from us to them (first time three special elections have flipped in a cycle since 1977-78). I am no longer receiving emails questioning whether my pessimism is just my pollster paranoia.

So, What Do We Do?

1. **The first step in any rehabilitation program is to admit there is a problem. There is no quick fix to the “Republican brand.” Despite how well he’s running, we can’t assume a competitive race by John McCain is going to bail out other Republicans on the ticket.**

Republicans have to recognize that this problem is not limited to a handful of people with names and political offices other than their own. Given the significant shift in party ID against us since 2006 (as discussed in April’s memo), anyone who got under 60% in 2006 had better run a campaign as though their political life depended on it – because it does. Anyone not on the ballot in 2006 should presume they are in danger – the electorate in 2008 is attitudinally and demographically VERY different than before.

The lack of confidence voters have toward the GOP has been growing for a long time – starting with Iraq, accelerated by Katrina, piled on by concerns about the economy and gas prices. Not to mention the voters’ negative reaction to a curious disinterest in ethics by a staggering number of Republican members of Congress over the last three-four years.

Here’s a quote from a swing voter in a recent focus group that sums up the disappointment with Republicans:

“I didn’t think we’d be there (Iraq) that long and that many dead, that many coming back wounded so badly. That’s just so frustrating. And then gas prices, job layoffs left and right, good prices, housing.”

This problem is NOT going to be fixed in five months. A new slogan, a convention, a Vice Presidential pick is NOT going to change the fundamental dynamics of this election cycle. Long disdained by some Republicans for being a maverick, John McCain’s standing with the electorate will be difficult for other Republicans to suddenly emulate. Simply invoking his name – or Barack Obama’s name as a negative – won’t do the job.

Action Step: Look for issues that are un-Republican. Or, at the very least, populist Republican. Reflexively taking the side of big business and big oil is a recipe for defeat. Defend taxpayers, not corporations.

2. **We are absent from the battlefield of ideas.**

With the exception of John McCain and some others over the past several months, most of the party seems unable to come up with new ideas. Instead, many Republicans are focusing on ideas that are continually recycled. And, since those ideas did not catch on with the public back when Republicans had a positive image, why would we expect those ideas to do so now!.

3. **Recognize that even your winning coalition doesn't like us very much.**

In April, I wrote about how the math has changed since 2002, '04, and '06. Then, we needed 90% of Republicans, 12% of Democrats, and 50% of Independents to win a swing seat. Now, we need 55-60% of Independents to win, even with getting 90% of the GOP in a swing seat. Independents are not very favorable to Republicans right now, as we trail 22%-36% on the generic ballot with that swing group. Twenty-two percent (22%) is a long way from the 55-60% we need with that group, so your campaign will have to make that deficit up on its own.

The math is actually harder than that, as my partner Neil Newhouse pointed out to me. Currently, in the NPR survey, President Bush has a 33% approval rating. Assuming 97% of them vote Republican, that means we need to get another 19% of the electorate to get to 51%. Thus, a minimum of 37% of a winning Republican's vote in a swing district will come from voters who don't like the President. If the President's numbers are below 33% in your area, that number goes up.

Action Step: Make a list of issues on which you differed from the President, and be ready to talk about them. The Democratic message is that incumbent Smith is a rubberstamp for President Bush. You need to present evidence that this is NOT the case.

To repeat from last month's memo: Believe it or not, a significant number of Republicans won in swing districts last cycle by following a model of aggressive engagement and a focus on winning swing voters. The "base only" model failed in 2006, and is even less likely to work in 2008.

4. **Take some risks.**

The voters are angry. Only 16% say the country is going in the right direction, while 80% say wrong track. Soft fuzzy messaging won't cut it. Get angry at big oil, OPEC. Talk about things you've done to fight for change.

Action Step: No soft stuff in your general election advertising. Even positive messaging needs to have an edge to it. Not a hateful edge, but a "this has got to change because the American people are getting screwed" edge.

5. **Democrats don't have a monopoly on themes. Steal some of those themes.**

There's a strange outrage among Republicans that the Democrats who have won the two Southern open seats didn't do it fairly because they are values conservatives, so they didn't come out of the cookie cutter mold of most national Democrats.

Look at some of the language in the themes that the NPR survey tested from the Democrats. You might not feel comfortable with all of the examples below, but if you think Republicans can not use any of those, that's simply too much Inside the Beltway thinking:

- “The economy has worked well for CEOs but not for the middle class, and we need a big change in direction.”
- “We should repeal the special tax breaks for companies moving jobs overseas and for the oil companies.”
- “We need to cut middle class taxes across the board, limit drug prices, and make health care more affordable.”
- “We should partner with business to invest in clean alternative energy to create the jobs of the future.”
- “We must strengthen America's security by starting to reduce our troops in Iraq in a responsible way, force the Iraqi government to use its oil money to pay for reconstruction, and work with other nations to bring stability.”
- “With such financial pressures on families, we need to focus completely on middle class tax relief and making sure government works for them, not the special interests.”

Look, we all know Democrats don't mean it when they talk about middle class tax relief, but they say it anyhow. At least Republicans mean this stuff, but for too long we've let the Democrats hit us for tax cuts for the rich.

6. Work to develop a message on the economy.

The Democrat message is pretty straightforward. Overall, it is that:

“The money spent in Iraq is keeping us from solving our problems here. George Bush and Republicans have allowed the rich to get richer, while the middle class is getting squeezed. Oil companies are making huge profits as Americans pay more at the pump, and the lack of oversight allowed the housing mess to occur.”

One Republican candidate recently said that the best way to revive the economy is to extend the Bush tax cuts. Sorry, but it's going to take a LOT more than that to have a credible message on the economy.

Action Step: Spend some time now to put together your economic plan/message. Test them out on the stump, and see what resonates (recognize that you are probably being taped, so show some discretion when floating trial balloons). Don't get lost in the weeds however, remember that you need to frame your ideas with a message of change for the middle class.

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Wrap-up

Between the GOP's financial disadvantage and our disadvantage on public opinion, nobody else can win your race for you. You have to do it yourself. Without being reckless, choose the bolder option over the safer option. Choose the stronger message over the softer message. Finally, target swing voters or perish.