



From Mass Alliance “Getting Ready to Run” Training

What Does a Good Campaign Look Like

We can't actually tell you what your race will be like. We can't actually teach you what to do. Your race will be different and unique in some ways from any that has ever been run. So you can never simply copy and paste. Each election is new and scary. You will feel that you don't know what to do when you begin. And you should feel that way. But if you are honest about the things that make your race different, then you will be able to apply some basic principles to make the decisions that are right for your particular race. The principles are constant. You can apply them to any race, and they will lead you to a good decision.

Strategic Decisions

Strategic considerations must be made anew with every race. Several factors should be taken into account:

Turnout

Will it be a high or low turnout race? Is it a primary or general election? If it is a democratic primary it will have lower turnout and only democrats can participate, so the target universe will be smaller and more progressive. What races at the top of the ballot might draw in more voters? If there is a presidential election turnout will be high and many voters won't have any idea who their state representative is. On the other hand, if it is a special election with only your race on the ballot, everyone showing up will have a candidate in mind. Is there some factor, a particular issue or scandal, making this a high-drama race? If a scandal has added publicity to the election, turnout may be higher.

Turnout can be estimated using historical numbers from previous elections of a similar type. For example, if you are running in a contested Democratic Primary for State Representative in a gubernatorial election year, you might look back to your district's turnout in 2006 or 2002. Remember to add or subtract turnout based on how your race differs from those that have come before. You must have an idea of turnout to determine the number of votes and identifications you need to secure to win.

Race Type

Is the race partisan or non-partisan? Are you challenging an incumbent, running for an open seat, or defending your currently held seat? If the race is for an open seat there are likely to be more candidates. If those candidates are running good campaigns, the turnout will be higher. Different types of races will require different electoral strategies.

Political Climate

What political mood are the voters in? If the economy is in decline or a number of scandals have broken since the last election, incumbents may face a more difficult election than they otherwise would. What themes are being expressed in simultaneous political campaigns, particularly in more prominent elections? If, for example, the focus of a presidential campaign is on change versus experience, that can affect how you craft your message.

Opponents

Who are your opponents? Where are their bases, and how strong are they? Are they well known? Do they have ties to a particular community? If your base overlaps with their base and they are better known that could be



difficult for you. If their base is in one town and yours is in another town, this will affect your targeting. What are their strengths and their weaknesses? What are your strengths and weaknesses compared to your opponent's? Are they likely to run a good campaign? What could they do to win? Knowing these things ahead of time will allow you to focus your message on a compelling reason to vote for you over them.

These, as well as other race-specific factors, need to be considered each time you run for an office. Every race is going to be different in some way or another, and being prepared to address those differences is integral to running a winning campaign.

Principles

While the particular strategy employed in your race will be different from that of the candidate sitting next to you, the principles of grassroots campaigning will stay constant from race to race. Constants through any campaign include that the voters decide the outcome and resources will be limited. In addition, successful targeting, strong message development, and good discipline are key to winning your election.

Voters Decide

Ultimately, whether or not you are elected depends on how many people vote for you. We know this sounds silly, but it is the thing candidates screw up most often. It does not depend directly on support of the political establishment, endorsements, or other prominent support you might receive. It does not depend directly on how much money you raise. Each person only gets one vote, and while you might receive campaign resources and publicity from prominent supporters, at the end of the day it is the majority of the voters, most of them ordinary citizens, who will determine your fate. Therefore, **your time and resources should be spent trying to secure as many votes as you can**. If you are not spending your time and resources on persuading people to vote for you and getting your supporters to turnout, then you are not using what you have in the most effective manner.

Resources are Limited

Every Campaign has three types of resources: people, money, and time. These resources are limited to varying degrees, and each has its own set of considerations:

People- A well-run grassroots campaign will rely on people-power to help get more votes. Largely, this will come in the form of volunteers. People are not a strictly limited resource, as more volunteers can always be recruited. More staff can be hired if you have the money. If you keep people informed of what is going on in the campaign, make them feel appreciated, and find productive work for them to do they will come back again and again. You will get the most out of your volunteers if you establish a good process for input. They are on the ground and may observe trends and other voter characteristics you might not otherwise observe.

Money- Every campaign needs money to run. There is a myth that grassroots campaigns are less expensive; it isn't true. Good grassroots campaigns cost more and they win more often. The good news is, you can almost always find more money. It will come from people you know best, but you have to ask or they won't give it to you. Explain what is at stake and what you plan to use the money for. Budget carefully, and keep track of your fundraising and expenditures.

Time- The final, and most precious, resource on a campaign is time. In particular, the candidate's time. While you can recruit more volunteers and raise more money, you can't add more hours between now and the election. You have only so many hours in your life between now and the day you are elected. You will never get one back once it has passed—use them well. This means that whatever task a candidate or



campaign is doing needs to be the best use of time. For candidates, this means spending the vast majority of time door knocking and raising money, or taking care of themselves or their family. Other tasks can be delegated. Make a plan and stick to it to best maximize the use of your time.

Targeting Voters

In every election, a specific population of eligible voters exists defined by your district. These people can be broken down into a number of categories based on how they might participate. First, they might be divided based on how likely they are to actually participate in the election:

Likely Voters	
Infrequent Voters	
Non-Voters	

It is important to note that the distribution of these boxes will be different for every election and every candidate. For example, if you are Barack Obama and running for President, the percentage of likely voters is huge and non-voters is negligible. If you are Lucy B. Candidate running for City Council At Large, no matter how charming you may be or how many voters in your district turned out to vote for Barack Obama, the percentage of likely voters for you is very small. Be honest with yourself when you assess the particulars of your race.

The population might further be divided among those who support you, those who support your opponent(s), and those who are undecided:

	Ours	Undecided	Theirs
Likely Voters			
Infrequent Voters			
Non-Voters			

In order to plan a campaign that will get you the votes you need to win, you must have an idea of how many votes will be cast and what number will give you a solid margin of victory. You need to know how many people are likely to vote in this election based on historical trends and how turnout might be affected. Of those who will vote, how many are likely to vote for you. How many more will you need to persuade to vote for you to reach your winning number of votes? Once you know how many votes you need, you can begin to figure out where, using your targeting box, those votes will come from.

The campaign should focus on two of the categories: supporters who are infrequent voters and undecideds who are likely to vote. To get votes from infrequent voters who you know will support you should they vote you have to turn them out, or engage in a Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaign. To get votes from undecideds who you know will turn out you must persuade them to support you using your message.

The only other set of voters you should spend any time with are your electoral base, including your friends, family,



volunteers, those who have voted for you in the past, etc. You will use the base to raise resources (money and people). Except for raising money and getting volunteers you should not spend much time with your base. Instead, get them to help you persuade undecideds and turnout infrequent voters.

	Ours	Undecided	Theirs
Likely Voters	Base	Persuade (Message)	
Infrequent Voters	Turnout (GOTV)		
Non-Voters			

Your campaign should focus its resources on these two tasks: persuading undecided likely voters and turning out supporters who vote infrequently. In fact, these are the only two things you can do to get more votes. Any time you use resources for other means (aside from raising more resources to do more of these things), they are not being put to best use.

Progressives often fall into the trap of trying to either turn out non-voters or convince likely voters who support your opponent and would never in a million years support you that they should. While there is a time and a place to register new voters and wage informational campaigns designed to persuade even your staunchest opponent, your campaign is not the place for these activities.

If you are constantly asking yourself if your campaign is persuading the persuadable and turning out those who can be turned out for your election (and you are shying away from anything that doesn't accomplish at least one of those tasks well) you will run a much better campaign.

Message

A Message is the tool you use to persuade voters to choose you.

Your message should be a cohesive theme explaining why voters should choose you over your opponent. Your message will be the theme of your campaign. It will define who you are as a candidate and help frame the debate for voters. It should characterize you, your opponent, and the stakes of the election. A good message sets up the choice between you and your opponent, and it is the one thing you want to be in the voters' minds when they go in to the polling place on Election Day. You only get one message!

It is important to remember that a message is not an answer to a set of questions, a list of issue positions, a slogan, or a biography.

Your message should meet six basic criteria. It should be:

1. Clear- voters should be able to understand your message easily
2. Credible- voters must believe your message applies to you
3. Defining- your message must differentiate you from your opponent
4. Durable- your message should last the entire campaign
5. Resonant- your message must inspire voters and connect to their concerns
6. Robust- your message needs to withstand attack and hold up to your opponent's message



Message Box

**What We Say
About Ourselves**

**What We Say
Say About Them**

**What
They Say
About Us**



Evidence: Using Data to Target and Message

When making decisions about which voters to target and how to develop your message, the only way to know what the voters think is to ask them. Many campaigns go wrong by assuming they can predict voter behavior based simply on demographics or geography. Designing a message without finding out what voters care about the most is also a mistake. There are several ways to gather data about what voters actually think:

Formal polling- If you have the resources available, you should put a poll in the field to find out what messages actually move voters toward you.

Feedback and data from field work- As you and your volunteers canvass, you should keep careful track of who you talk to and how they respond. Over time this data can help you make informed decisions.

Ask Unconventional People- While you will get many kinds of help from political insiders, they are actually the worst people to ask about the thoughts and feelings of average voters. Seek out members of your community who you would not normally talk to about politics and ask them what they think.

Crunch the Numbers- Collect and analyze data and make sure your decisions are based on the real data you collect

Beware of Anecdotes- You will hear all kinds of stories about what the town is like, but make sure you base your campaign activities and targeting on confirmed data.

Discipline

These strategies for grassroots campaigning are not a secret. Knowing them alone does not make a great campaign. What separates excellent grassroots campaigns from other campaigns is the discipline with which the strategies and principles are carried out. If you want to win, you must be committed to doing the most effective things (mostly knocking on doors and making fundraising calls) and to doing these things not with but instead of other less effective things.

What does the balance of the whole campaign look like for the candidate?

Over the course of the campaign you should focus on the activities that will best help you persuade undecided voters and turnout supporters. The diagram below gives a basic guide for the percent of time you should spend on each of the activities in the year leading up to your election day. Notice that as you get closer to Election Day, the overall amount of time you need to devote will increase.

