



Courting In

A Democratic plan

By Mark Mellman

In closely contested elections, independents are often the key to victory. In such circumstances, 80% or more of partisans support their party's candidate, with voters who eschew partisan labels holding the balance. More often than not, in close elections, capturing the independents is a prerequisite for victory. That is likely to be the case in this year's presidential race, as well as in key House and Senate races. However, independents are not some radically different form of human life that responds to a completely unique approach by election campaigns. Even we hard-core partisans must admit that independents are people, too. Nonetheless, there are some useful considerations to keep in mind when developing an approach to these voters.

First, tone matters. Many independents refuse a partisan label for an important reason: they do not like political parties or partisanship. Others find something to like in both parties, not just one. Central to their critique of politics is the notion that what they call "partisan bickering" forces substance and problem-solving out of the system. They (wrongly) see politicians struggling for partisan advantage, not for policy or principle. They believe elected officials are trying to score points, not solve problems. They see officeholders as more interested in winning than in serving. Most independents gravitate to that label not because they cannot make up their minds, but because they reject partisanship itself.

Candidates who break out of these stereotypes do best with independents. In this sense, the tone a candidate affects can make a dramatic difference. Those who come across as fierce partisans, always bashing the opposition, tend to lose independent support. Those who look like they can reach across the partisan divide generate votes from independents. Seri-

ous "independent" candidates do well among "independent" voters, not because they share a "party" label, but because they share an orientation. Almost by definition, the independent candidate is not embedded in a self-perpetuating party machine committed to preserving its own power above all else. The independent candidate does not always defend one party while castigating the other. The independent candidate, like the independent voter, rejects the fundamental tenets of partisanship. Governors like Jesse Ventura and Angus King commandeered the independent vote in part because they forcefully rejected partisan politics.

But one does not have to be an independent to get independent votes. John McCain's storied rise among independents emerged out of the tone and posture he struck. McCain was a "straight talker" who appeared unafraid to criticize his own party and even make common cause with the opposition, in pursuit of the national interest. He seemed willing to do the right thing, even if that meant working with Democrats. Independents ate up his straight talk and his efforts to transcend party. Republicans hated it. Similarly, in 1992, Bill Clinton was willing to take on cherished idols of the Democratic party. Now, Al Gore must find his own idols to break.

For independents, the way candidates talk—their tone, and approach—is as important as what they say. Jesse Ventura got votes on college campuses after announcing his opposition to student loans. It surely was not what Ventura said that excited these young independents; it was how he said it. His opposition to politics as usual counted more than his opposition to a program students cherish.

Next, focus on specifics, not generalities. In recent years voters have become more cynical, or perhaps more savvy, about campaign promises. Voters' BS meters have been placed on a rather sensitive setting. They reject platitudes but warm to specifics. Vague generalities don't make it with independents. This does not mean that

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voters are interested in 30-point plans or 82-page books. They just want some concrete idea of how you plan to get from here to there. Saying you want to “improve education” is pablum. Saying you want to “improve education by reducing class size” constitutes a concrete plan of action.

Democrats have yet another impetus propelling us toward specificity. Republicans often win on general principles. We usually win on specifics. In general, voters believe there is too much government regulation. But it is hard to find a specific arena in which they want to relax control. Fewer than one in ten want less environmental regulation, or less work safety regulation, or less regulation of insurance companies. In general, voters want to cut government spending. But there is no specific program area where a majority would choose to implement that general principle.

This insight was central to the strategy developed for the Democratic comeback after the 1994 debacle. Republican revolutionaries running on the general principle of less government and less government spending were going to be victorious over Democrats arguing for the status quo. But we saw that moving from the general to the specific gave us the upper hand. When we showed that Republicans were not just about less government, but about cutting Medicare, education and the environment, we were transformed into winners again.

Of course, in some areas, we have the upper hand on the general principles as well. Even in these instances, focusing on the specifics often fortifies our position. Some six in ten Americans believe in the general notion that gun control laws should be made more strict, a healthy margin in favor of the principle behind Democratic policies. But 75% to 90% support various specific gun safety measures, from requiring child safety locks to closing the gun show loophole. Similarly, health care in general is a salient issue. But the cost of prescription drugs or the fact that HMO bureaucrats are making medical decisions instead of your doctor is of even greater concern.

Democrats also need to project a compelling agenda. Independents like to believe they are in it for the issues. They (usually wrongly) envision themselves on a higher plane, examining the candidates’ agendas in a “serious,” “nonpartisan” way. Democrats need to give them the red meat they profess to want. We need to give them an agenda that appears to unite people, rather than divide them. Fortunately, we have one. It comes under six headings, but again it’s the specifics that really count.

A Democratic Agenda

Health care

- Require that doctors, not insurance company bureaucrats, make medical decisions
- Expand Medicare to cover prescription drugs
- Allow Americans to buy prescription drugs at the same lower prices pharmaceutical companies sell to Canada and Mexico

Education improvements

- Reduce class size
- Improve teacher training
- Institute tough standards and require kids to meet them before graduating

Privacy

- Prevent companies from buying and selling personal information, particularly medical and financial records

Environment

- Keep our air clean and water pure, with tough standards and real enforcement
- Leave future generations a land legacy of wild places and open spaces

Controlled gun violence

- Require child safety locks
- Close the gun show loophole to help prevent criminals from buying guns

Strengthen Social Security/Medicare

- Use the surplus to strengthen these programs first, rather than squander it on tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans

Not even Jon Corzine could hope to communicate this entire agenda to voters, even if he lived in South Dakota and bought television time at \$35 a gross rating point. But these are issues, policies and positions that unite voters across the political spectrum—Democrats, independents, and even Republicans. Nearly every Democratic candidate in the country from Al Gore to state legislators will, and should, be emphasizing some part of this agenda. This is the substantive way to appeal to independents.

Because independents generally dislike politics, they are not anxious to be found by political campaigns. They do not congregate around their television sets to watch

Sunday morning interview programs, nor do they rush home to read political coverage in the newspaper.

In fact, attention to news and politics is down dramatically over the last decade, particularly among independents. In 1993, 77% said they regularly watched local TV news. Today that number has declined to 56%. National network news-watching has also shown a dramatic decline, from 60% watching regularly in 1993 to just 30% today. Newspaper readership has suffered, too (58% to 46%); and interest in campaigns has nose-dived. In June 1992, 63% said they had thought quite a lot about the campaign. Today it's just 46%. In each case, independents have led the way to the exit doors. In 1996, for example, 77% of Republicans and 75% of Democrats reported watching TV programs about the presidential campaign, compared to just 56% of independents.

Of course, internet use is up dramatically, from 4% to 33%, but campaigns typically make poor use of this new medium.

The bottom line is simple—it is becoming increasingly difficult for either side to communicate to this vital swing constituency. Campaigns look for them in all the wrong places. The traditional political ad buy of news adjacencies and political talk programs will not deliver independents. Increasingly, Democrats will have to buy prime time programming and fund even greater repetition of the message. Otherwise, we simply cannot break through. A significant part of the escalation of campaign costs stems from the difficulty of communicating a message. It takes more and more repetitions to get the chance to connect with a voter. Not too long ago, conventional wisdom said it took 500 gross-rating points to get a spot through to voters. Today the number is more like 1000, 1,200 or even 1,500 gross rating points. Ironically, in an over-communicated world, the key to breaking through is more communication.

Over time, though, more than the brute force embodied in increased advertising dollars will be needed. Candidates must develop new ways of communicating. The web provides a whole new medium, but we are just learning how to use it. Despite all of the hype, only a tiny fraction of the electorate actually chooses to visit candidate websites. Even in some tech-heavy states the proportion is less than 5%.

Another hurdle in formulating a communications strategy is that lots of voters don't decide on a candidate until late in the campaign. Independents are even more likely than partisans to make their voting decisions late. In the 1996 election for president, 16% of Democrats and 20% of Republicans made their vote decisions during the last two weeks of the campaign. By contrast, 49% of independents waited until then.

Candidates need to focus their campaigns when voters are open to absorbing the information. Communication needs to be concentrated during the periods when voters are

making real decisions. Focusing on independents means back-loading your communication.

And, with independents often paying little attention, Al Gore, as well as other Democrats, needs to define a simple question around which voters can structure their electoral choice. The Gore campaign needs to control the question that voters ask themselves as they walk into the voting booth. The campaign needs to find a question that voters are willing to ask, and to which Al Gore is the unique answer. The strategic struggle in this campaign, as in most others, is to control that question. Tactics and targeting follow from that decision.

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In the 1992 presidential election, the questions were, “Who will bring about change? Who will focus on my needs, my concerns and my problems, here at home?” In 1996, the questions were, “Who will keep a good thing going? Who really cares about me?” George Bush framed the '88 campaign around, “Who is the safe choice to keep a pretty good thing going and who is risky?” Al Gore needs a good question, too.

Most of these presidential-level questions are not about policy or specific issues. Most voters never find out candidates' detailed positions, even on top issues. Policy is important as an illustration of broader concerns, principles, values and perspectives.

For years Democrats engaged in a sterile debate over which was more important, base voters or swing voters. The debate was destined to lead down a dark alley, because the answer was obvious. We need both the swing and the base. Neither is large enough by itself to win. Independent swing voters will not move into the Democratic column without being courted. Base voters will not show up to vote unless they, too, are courted. Thus, Democrats at every level from Al Gore on down need an issue agenda, symbols, styles, and vocabulary that appeal to both. Fortunately, the agenda outlined above meets that criterion. But in the midst of this year's media frenzy over the independents, Democrats dare not forget our base. ●