CASE STUDY: THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD SOMETIMES ENDS ABRUPTLY

A hard fought win at the ballot box is exhilarating. Clients can slip into believing they can overcome any new challenge after a big victory. One client wanted to leverage a June primary success managed by Tom Shepard & Associates into a November win on another issue. The only thing in common between the two issues was the opposing side's sugar daddy, who had been a target in the run-up to the June election. Before rushing headlong into the campaign, Competitive Edge acquired a voter sample from Political Data, Inc. and conducted a benchmark poll among the likely electorate. Sure enough, the backer of the June measure was a little beat up, but analysis showed it was not nearly enough to cause his November measure big problems. The measure, you see, would make the City Attorney elected rather than appointed. The overriding factor in this case was voter choice. Despite extensive message-testing, the electorate was not going to budge to the point where voters would oppose expanding their own right to vote. We advised against waging an expensive campaign against the measure. We felt the wise move would be to spend resources on behalf of a chosen candidate once the City Attorney became an elective office. That is what our client did and the measure easily passed with 59% of the vote in November 2008. The following June, the client's preferred candidate won a very close election.

Lesson: Use good research to save money and pick the battles you can win.

Winter 2010

The Costs of Cutting Costs

Do robo polls – recorded surveys conducted by machine that ask respondents to register their opinions by pressing buttons on their telephone keypads – outperform traditional live interviewers? *The Edge* admits to being skeptical. After all, throughout our 23-plus years we have been extremely accurate using our professional interviewers. That said, we're eager to give clients the best possible research at the most reasonable price, so we're open to the possibility that robopolls could be accurate, at least for tracking polling.

CERC has experimented with the technique. Alas, we have yet to make robopolls work for us. When more than 60% of the people we contact hang-up on us, we cannot trust that data. Nor have we seen consistent accuracy in real-life situations from robopolls conducted by other firms. Further, recent Pew Center research concludes that leaving cell phones out of a polling sample leads to biased results. Because automated dialers are prohibited from calling cell phones, that would appear to make robopolls less predictive. But perhaps things are improving for robopolls. We decided to examine one high profile situation where the two techniques squared off. See what we found inside.

Also, CERC is delighted to announce the promotion of Sasha Tobin to the Research Manager position. She has recently been joined in the department by Research Assistant Rachel Ward.

Robopolls versus Live Polls: Head to Head in MA

The date is January 19th 2010; the setting is Scott Brown beating Martha Coakley with 52% of the vote in the most watched Senate race of the year. For this analysis we are only using public polls conducted after the first of the year to avoid any confounding by the holidays.

In the robopoll corner we have eight polls. The technique's most visible practitioner, Scott Rasmussen weighs in with two polls, PPP has two, Pajamas Media/Cross Target has two, MRG has one and Insider Advantage has one. On the "live" side are two ARG surveys and a Suffolk/7News survey.

Here is how we are evaluating the polls: We first back out the small number of votes for third party candidate Joseph Kennedy. We also back out the undecided voters. Polls whose results are then within the margin of sampling error (MoSE) of the actual election outcome and whose results had Brown winning are judged to be accurate polls. Let's look at the robopolls.

* Rasmussen had Brown losing in both polls, so he had two misses.

* The first PPP poll had a MoSE of +/- 3.6 and had Brown with 51%, well within range and the second PPP poll had a MoSE of +/- 2.8 and had Brown with 52%, so PPP had two accurate polls.

* The first PJM/Cross Target poll had a MoSE of +/- 3.2 and had Brown with an astounding 58% of the vote. Although it had Brown winning, this poll is inaccurate. It was such an outlier among other polls that Pajamas Media commissioned a second one the day before the election. That poll had the race 55% for Brown and, with a MoSE of +/- 4.1, that gives PJM/Cross Target one accurate poll out of two. We should note that, for practical campaign purposes, a poll conducted the day before the election is worthless.

* The Inside Meford/MRG poll had a MoSE of +/- 4.1 and had Brown with 57%. Inside Meford/MRG was therefore inaccurate with its only poll.

* The Politico/Insider Advantage poll, another survey taken the day before the election, had a MoSE of +/- 3.5 and had Brown with 55%. So this firm was accurate with its only poll.

So four of the eight robopolls were accurate. Now let's turn to the live polls.

* The first Suffolk/7 News poll nailed the outcome right on with 52% for Brown, so its only poll was extremely accurate.

* The first ARG survey also nailed the exact percentage for Brown and its second one, with a MoSE of 4.0% had Brown at 54%. ARG was therefore accurate with both its polls.

So the final tally in this head-to-head matchup is a clear victory for the live methodology, with a batting average of 1.000 versus a .500 success rate for the robopolls. Obviously, although these three live polls were accurate, live polls will not nail the outcome every time. However, what is disturbing is that the automated polls were only as good as coin flip. Clients paying for those polls were throwing their money away half the time . . . alas, if they only knew -- ahead of the election -- which half were the good ones!

Another interesting point to come out of this analysis is that these robopolls tended to lose their accuracy when they were conducted more than a day before the election. As cell phone-only households become more pervasive, we believe robopolls will become even less relaible. CERC will stick with live surveys. ★

Research Department Additions

Competitive Edge promoted Sasha Tobin to the position of Interim Research Manager in January 2010. She performed so splendidly, that the "Interim" label was dropped only three months later. Sasha came to the firm in December 2008 and had served as Research Associate since then. Sasha is responsible for the data collected by the firm, as well as the production of fast, flawless and beautiful reports and charting. She handles web survey programming and panel management, a new and expanding area for the company.

Sasha earned her Bachelor of Arts in Government at the College of William & Mary. In addition to crunching data, Sasha likes to cook, read and play soccer.

Sasha has been joined in the department by Research Assistant Rachel Ward. Among many things, Rachel is tasked with verbatim response coding, proofreading, report generation, and quality control. Rachel earned her Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Chapman University. Her diverse interests range from Irish dance to drag racing to horror movies. ★

CERC Staff Locked Up…

… for a good cause! Office Manager Shari Ciancio and Research Manager Sasha Tobin were "jailbirds" for an afternoon in the MDA Telethon Executive Lock-Up last August. Our CERC team raised 2.6% of the pledges which totaled over $28,000 from this local fund-raising effort! Funds collected through the Lock-up stay in the local community to fund MDA Summer Camp and the Muscle Disease Clinic at Rady Children's Hospital to name only two of the many deserving organizations. ★

On CERC's Nightstand . . .

The Thumpin': How Rahm Emanuel and the Democrats Learned to Be Ruthless and Ended the Republican Revolution by Naftali Bendavid

What a difference a political cycle or two make. It didn't take long for these books to look antiquated. I bought the book on Emanuel's 2006 tour of duty as the DCCC's top strategist to see what was under the hood during the Democrats' epic takeover of Capitol Hill. For political pros the book is a disappointment. The author does pull back the curtain a bit, but does not get deeply into the tactics that the DCCC used. The reader is left with the impression that the mercurial Emanuel invented "discipline" -- perhaps he was the first Democrat in awhile to impose it – but other than that, the inner workings of his achievement are left largely unexamined.

40 More Years: How the Democrats Will Rule the Next Generation by James Carville and Rebecca Buckwalter-Poza

Carville's book is really half-baked. It was basically written by a grad student who distilled Carville's rants (admittedly, that's no small task). Much of the book gloats over 2008 and cites cherry-picked data to support his contention that Democrats will rule this century's first half. While that prediction has rapidly unraveled, Carville does proffer some worthwhile advice. One point is that campaigns are usually won at the center – something Republicans got away from. Another is the idea that the youth vote's fascination with Democrats will help them in high turnout scenarios for cycles to come. Other than that, Carville's book will be a curiosity piece that my grandkids will read for laughs. ★