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November 30, 2006

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Bob Moore & Hans Kaiser
RE: Election 2006: A Pollster's Perspective

As you reflect on the 2006 mid-term elections and try to make sense out of the results, we thought it might be helpful to share with you some of our insights from this cycle. It is clear to us that this election was a vote of no confidence in the Bush Administration and GOP leadership in Congress. Democrats were very loyal to their nominees and turned out to vote in higher than average numbers, while Republicans showed less loyalty and turned out in lower than average numbers and Independents voted for Democrats in larger numbers than usual. As a result, Democrats made major gains in state legislatures, Governorships, Congress and the U.S. Senate.

But, the real news out of this election is that politics has not changed. Money and message still rule the day and individual campaigns and committees which choose to ignore these age old axioms of politics still suffer on Election Day, as many did. The challenge this year for Republicans was to overcome a national mood turned sour by the apparent lack of progress in Iraq, high profile misdeeds by GOP congressmen and uncertainty about the economy (despite its rather solid performance). In this climate, Democrats decided -- either consciously or by accident -- that a positive vision for America's future was not the way to victory. Instead, they focused on the negative and drove that message as long and as hard as they could. In the vacuum created by the ineptitude of the GOP message machine, it was enough to win control of Congress.

Nonetheless, Democrats did not win every competitive race and were less likely to win where GOP campaigns and committees focused on fundamentals, raised the money to spread a message and made the Democrat opponent the issue. Every campaign will tell you they would prefer to run on the issues and present a positive vision for America instead of running negative ads about their opponent. But Republicans were running with no national message and under a President who seemed disinclined to directly address the issues voters cared most about. As a result, GOP candidates had to create contrasts with their opponents or become victims of the national environment.

In this climate, successful campaigns defined their Democrat opponents, made them defend their liberal records and never let up. They eschewed entreaties from their supporters to "go positive" and instead, stuck to the script and continually and consistently made the election about their opponents' shortcomings. Many of the vulnerable Republicans who

were able to do this consistently still hold office. Not all, but the lesson of this election was that if the national mood puts your party and you in a hole and the electorate is predisposed to think badly of you, you must make your opponent an even less appealing alternative.

Positive ads for Republicans did not move persuadable voters in 2006. Candidates who polled on a regular basis saw their numbers sink with each positive ad they put on the air but stabilize and rebound when the opponent became the issue. The lesson from this election: If voters think you are bad, the alternative must be made worse.

Money

U.S. Senator Mitch McConnell has frequently been heard describing the three most important elements to a winning campaign – money, money and money. It always gets a chuckle when he delivers the line but the point is a decidedly serious one. Campaigns that are outspent must have an inordinately better message to overcome the weight of television, mail, radio and all the various means of communicating with voters. And when a party has no national message it's particularly tough for individual candidates to come up with a compelling one on their own to overcome being outspent. American culture screams at her citizens and today's message is forgotten well before the next episode of Desperate Housewives. Weight, repetition and simplicity rule the day. As they always have.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in Montana, where U.S. Senator Conrad Burns was overcome by the sheer weight of his opponent's and third party ads. Throughout the month of September and most of October Burns was outspent on TV by a margin of 2.5 to 1. The Democrat Senatorial Committee, Jon Tester's campaign and other third party groups combined to air almost 2600 points of television per week aimed directly at defining Burns. The Burns campaign was able to counter with just 1000 points per week. Like Custer at the Little Big Horn, Burns circled the wagons and fought valiantly against an overwhelming opponent, hoping that the cavalry would show up before it was too late.

But polling numbers during this period consistently showed Burns trailing by 6-10 points and many wrote off his candidacy. Given the huge differential in volume, it's remarkable that the Burns numbers stabilized. Then with a little more than two weeks to go the campaign had the resources to boost their volume and the numbers started to move, and with a week to go, the race was within the margin of error. At that point third party groups began to spend on Burns' behalf but the two months of unanswered pounding had taken their toll, and Burns lost. For those who stayed on the sidelines believing Burns could not win, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The tragedy of this race for Republicans is that on a level playing field, Burns would have won and the GOP would still control the U.S. Senate. Ironically, of all the competitive senate races in 2006, Montana was the most Republican with the least expensive media market.

Demographics

The Burns race also demonstrates the power of demographics. George W. Bush always did well in Montana (58% in 2000/59% in 2004) because voters are much closer to Bush on the issues than they were to Al Gore or John Kerry. To be sure, Burns had difficult challenges to overcome, but during the last weeks of the campaign when the weight of Burns' advertising began to take its toll on Jon Tester and the message of his liberal background began to take hold, the numbers began to move; soft Republicans came home and Conservative Independents started moving in Burns' direction. Tester was becoming less appealing than the image of Burns created by the Democrats. It wasn't rocket science but it required full funding.

The partisan makeup of a district or a state still has a very significant impact on the outcome of a race. In targeting that is still true, as Democrats found in many heavily GOP districts where they thought they might have a chance to catch someone asleep at the switch. Republican candidates in solid Republican districts who ran spirited campaigns and

made their opponent the issue were successful. Even campaigns in marginal GOP districts that were able to make their opponents the issue and drive the debate were successful. Party loyalty was accorded candidates who reminded voters that the Democrat alternative was not in their best interest. But candidates who were unsuccessful or unwilling to provide that contrast were victims of the national mood.

And the national mood was justifiably sour on the GOP. Lifelong Republicans looked at current events and saw things they had not signed up for when they joined the party: excessive spending, bribery, pedophilia, and, unfortunately, a national defense strategy that seemed less competent than what Democrats were offering. The one area where the party was true to its faithful was tax policy. And it was on the issue of taxes, in many races, where the contrasts between Democrats and Republicans would save many seats, especially in traditional GOP areas.

Leads Do Not Hold

Finally, from a polling perspective, the most important point candidates should always remember, and something that was as true for the GOP this year as any year, is the fact that leads do not hold. A poll taken in September does not indicate where the race will be on Election Day. It offers insights and direction but is not a crystal ball. A poll that shows you ahead by 10-15 points six weeks out does not mean you are going to win, especially if you are not over 50%. And if your opponent is making you the issue during those six weeks and the mood is sour for your party and you do nothing, there is a very good chance you will lose. There is also a very good chance that the race will be close, even if you do everything right.

Many times incumbents enjoy leads well out from the election based on name ID alone. When this is the case it's always helpful to look at the generic ballot in the district or state. We were seeing generic ballot numbers that were a net negative for Republicans in districts where the GOP held solid advantages in party identification. That should be a strong clue that a supposed lead in September was unlikely to hold as voters began to focus on the campaigns.

Ultimately, the lesson from 2006 is to be prepared for any occurrence. Always build your war chest as if you will have the race of your life. Always have a campaign organization in place that is constantly monitoring the political situation. Always put together a focused, disciplined and aggressive campaign team. And never, ever be afraid to define your opponents, especially when a national message vacuum creates opportunity for them.

And oh yeah, one other thing. Try sticking with the principles that got you elected in the first place. Voters kinda like that.

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