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THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

ZERO FOR THIRTY-ONE: LESSONS FROM THE LOSS IN MAINE

BY JASMINE BEACH-FERRARA

TDS STRATEGY MEMO – ZERO FOR THIRTY-ONE: LESSONS FROM THE LOSS IN MAINE

By Jasmine Beach-Ferrara

Editor's Note: *This item, originally published on November 24, 1009, is a special guest post by **Jasmine Beach-Ferrara**, a student at Harvard Divinity School and the director of *The Progressive Project*,¹ a national organization that works in communities across the country to elect progressive candidates and promote LGBT civil rights. This article is based upon TPP's work on the "No on 1" campaign in Maine, and on other campaigns to defeat similar ballot measures. Several interviewees quoted in the piece are not identified by name at their own request. Jasmine has written for *The Democratic Strategist* in the past, and her writing has appeared in *The Advocate*, *Alternet.org*, *American Short Fiction* and other publications.*

Back in late September, I traveled with two friends to Biddeford, Maine, to volunteer with the "No on 1" campaign, which was working to defeat Question 1, a proposal to strike down a law legalizing same-sex marriage in that state. It rained all day, the kind of weather that oscillates between mist and downpour and that, on a mild day, makes you laugh at its sheer excess. Our task was straightforward: go door to door, ask people how they planned to vote, rate them on a scale of one to five, and move on. The campaign was in the final stretch of the persuasion stage and this would be one of the last times they had face-to-face contact with swing voters. We were assigned to a middle-class neighborhood in which single-family homes dotted either side of a busy two-lane road. There were no sidewalks, and passing cars gave me a wide berth as I mucked along on the shoulder of the road, as obtrusive as a safety-conscious hunter in my orange raincoat.

Since 2004, the LGBT movement has lost thirty such campaigns across the nation and a lot was at stake in Maine. All of those losses had been explained by factors like inadequate funding, or in the case of the California "No on 8" campaign, an anemic field operation. The "No on 1" campaign was determined to do things better, and by all standard metrics they did.

At that point in the campaign season, the polls were dead even, which in these kind of ballot measures usually means we are actually down by a few points. But the "No on 1" campaign had already raised over \$2 million, twice as much as the other side. Volunteers had been canvassing since early summer, and there were paid organizers on the ground across the state. A national network of donors and field volunteers was also bolstering our efforts. Perhaps most significantly, the campaign had already identified the number of supporters they needed to win. Campaign lore holds that if you have these names on paper by early October and run a tight turnout operation, you will win in November.

I was almost done with my shift when I approached a brick ranch house with an open garage. A man in his sixties was wiping off an Allen wrench. Next to him was a motorcycle with long, athletic lines and a gleaming turquoise body. He was friendly as we talked about his bike and the weather. If he raised his eyebrows when I explained why I was there, the conversation didn't abruptly stop in its tracks, as sometimes happens. "I'll be voting yes," he said evenly.

"Can I ask why?"

“The Bible says one man, one woman.”

I nodded. In literal terms, he was right. In moments like this, I’ve often responded by coming right back about what else the Bible says. But this has never led anywhere except a quick dead end. So instead, I asked if I could talk with his wife.

She joined us in the garage, and it was then that I noticed the scooter propped next to the motorcycle, its body a turquoise that perfectly matched the bigger bike’s.

“Do you ride together?” I asked.

They laughed. “I let her get ahead,” the man said, “and then I catch her.”

She explained that she also opposed gay marriage. “As a married gay person, I can tell you that not much changes for anyone but the couple,” I said. “It mostly comes up when you’re talking about things like hospital visits, times when you really need your rights.”

“Our grandson is gay,” the woman said. “We raised him.” She went on to explain that their grandson was having a difficult time. From the time he was a child, she said, she’d known he was gay.

“I never picked up on it. She had to tell me,” her husband chimed in and they laughed again.

“Is it hard for you that he’s gay?” I asked the man.

He seemed surprised by this question and this in itself was telling. It became clear that their grandson was part of their life and much loved, if not fully understood. The conversation continued and then a bit suddenly, the man choked up and wiped his eyes. “I knew a guy growing up who was that way and he got picked on a lot. I used to stand up for him.” His wife put her arm around him. “He can’t stand when people get picked on,” she said.

For a moment, it was silent in the garage.

“Making same-sex marriage illegal sends a message that we’re second class citizens. It opens the doors for people to get picked on, and worse,” I said. They listened, but weren’t terribly persuaded. The conversation circled back to The Bible. I told them I was Christian and brought up an example of scripture that we don’t tend to follow literally – the mandate to give away all your material possessions. We spent a few minutes on this. But again, not terribly persuasive.

“Should I put you both down as planning to vote yes?” I asked.

“You know, I’m still making up my mind,” the woman said. “I just don’t know.”

The conversation ended a few minutes later when their dog—small, blind and adventurous—raced out of the garage and toward the road. The woman went to rescue him. I asked them to keep thinking about the issue and thanked them for the conversation, one of the longest I’ve ever had canvassing. It was also one of the most moving. I have thought of it countless times since then.

Walking away, I rated her as a “three,” or swing voter, and him as a “four,” or likely to vote yes. According to a literal interpretation of the campaign playbook, this conversation had actually been a waste of time in every regard except one: the campaign now knew not to spend time and resources doing further outreach to this couple. At this point in the campaign cycle, an exacting calculus kicks in and attention shifts to turning out identified supporters, “one’s” and “two’s” on the scale. All other voters are lumped together and categorized as unwinnable. For the next five weeks, this couple and voters like them would not hear directly from the campaign, except in TV ads. This is considered smart organizing, and typically it is.

So what went wrong when, five weeks later, the voters of Maine passed Question 1 by a margin of 53 – 47%, making gay marriage illegal? There has been virtual consensus that the “No on 1” campaign was well-run. The leadership of national organizations blamed the loss on the slow tides of history and the bigoted tactics of our opponents. Some grassroots activists said that after thirty-one losses, we should accept that these campaigns are unwinnable and start focusing our efforts elsewhere. Pundits also weighed in, with Nate Silver of fivethirtyeight.com observing that, “this may not be an issue where the campaign itself matters very much; people have pretty strong feelings about the gay marriage issue and are not typically open to persuasion.”

Here’s where I disagree. This loss confirmed a lesson that the thirty preceding it only suggested: we cannot win the support of swing voters by adhering to the traditional campaign playbook. To do so, we must tear out a few pages and write new plays.

We are losing because we are not persuading swing voters, yes. But that does not mean they cannot be persuaded. People change their views on this issue all the time, as family members and friends respond to a LGBT person’s coming out, or as church congregations vote to become open and affirming. Sometimes it takes years and sometimes it takes weeks. Rarely does it happen without a mixture of love, pain and patience. In these more intimate contexts, we call it transformation rather than “persuasion” and it doesn’t happen due to canvassing and phonebanking. It happens when the truths of someone’s life transcend the doctrine they believe in. Some parts of this process we can map and some remain mysterious to us. It is, after all, the work of the heart we are talking about here.

In a typical campaign, it is a reliably good strategy to stop talking to “three,” “four,” and “five” voters in the final weeks of the campaign. Politics, however, is anything but formulaic: in a campaign to defeat an anti-marriage amendment, not maximizing our contact with swing voters is a fatal mistake, and one we have now made thirty-one times in a row. We are prematurely cutting off communication with a critical swath of voters during the final weeks of the campaign. What the results in these thirty-one states show us clearly is these voters—who are conflicted, who do not respond to the scripts we are using and whom we have not tried to talk to directly since early October—trend as “yes” voters on Election Day.

Moving forward, we need to use the structure and mechanics of a traditional, well-run campaign and add a new component: a dedicated field and messaging strategy that micro-targets swing voters who are influenced by religion, with a goal of persuading them to vote or to abstain from voting. Here are four reasons why we have been losing the swing vote. Each is accompanied by a proposal for what we can do differently:

First, an election cycle is not long enough to completely change someone's mind about a deeply-held belief, or a conflicted one.

Proposal: An election cycle is enough time to move some swing voters and to persuade others to abstain from voting, if we use time and resources more effectively. We need to start targeting swing voters as soon as they are identified through traditional canvassing methods, but with a twist (which has been proposed by one of my collaborators in The Progressive Project, Adrienne Ellman). In addition to directly interacting with swing voters at the door, we will also ask all supporters (i.e., "one's" and "two's") that we encounter if they know any swing voters whom they would be willing to talk with personally or put us in touch with. This latter approach may not yield big numbers, but it helps a campaign access a social network.

As soon as a swing voter is identified, s/he will be referred to an outreach team, which will handle all contact with her/him through Election Day. This team will also handle follow up with supporters who offer to talk to swing voters they know.

Second, we rely on ineffective methods for persuasion. Scripted, one-off interactions with strangers are simply not going to change people's minds.

Proposal: We need to change the way we talk with swing voters, and who does the talking. Rather than asking all volunteers to do the same thing, the campaign will recruit a corps of outreach volunteers, with a particular emphasis on ministers, lay people from traditions and denominations that are known for opposing LGBT rights, and allies, including members of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), an advocacy and support group that has chapters across the nation. These volunteers should be people who live in the state, or can travel there on a regular basis. (This can be done easily. On one of the days that I volunteered in Maine, I was part of a volunteer team that also included a minister and two allies.)

This team will complete a one-time training session that focuses on skills such as empathic listening and engaging with people around specific faith-based concerns. Each volunteer will be assigned a growing universe of swing voters whom s/he will track through Election Day. S/he will contact voters using door-to-door conversations, phone calls and handwritten notes, with a goal of developing a personal rapport with each voter. They will not use scripts, but will focus interactions on understanding and engaging with a voter's specific motivation, concerns, and experiences. This type of sustained outreach is more intensive than traditional canvassing and phonebanking and will require a new level of infrastructural support for volunteers. In short, outreach volunteers will be doing relationship-based community organizing.

Third, in our strategies and national rhetoric, we make the mistake of treating swing voters, in both subtle and explicit ways, as if they are bigots.

Proposal: We need to adjust our mindset and approach to swing voters, regarding them not with condemnation or derision, but rather with empathy. We need to see them as people who can become allies over time, rather than as our opponents. Many swing voters feel genuinely conflicted: they are inclined toward fairness but are also trying to abide by the teachings of their faith. This does not mean giving a pass to bigoted behavior, which we will continue to condemn. But it does mean operating from a premise that each and every person can turn toward love and fairness, which is ultimately what we are asking them to do. This new approach

should be reflected in our messaging, our ads, and the rhetoric of our national organizations and spokespeople.

Fourth, we present swing voters with a falsely dichotomous choice—vote no or yes—and then we abandon efforts to personally communicate with swing voters in the final month of the campaign, the period of time during which they are actually making up their mind.

Proposal: For many swing voters, neither “yes” nor “no” corresponds to their actual beliefs and concerns. Rather than dismissing a voter because she cannot vow to vote no, we should instead stay in conversation with him/her through Election Day. If, by mid-October, it has become apparent that s/he will not vote no, we should begin encouraging her/him to abstain from voting on this one issue. This has the effect of peeling away “yes” voters from the other side and thus reducing the number of “no” votes required to win.

There is ample precedence for abstention as an informed voting choice in parliamentary and legislative contexts; there is also evidence that voters make this choice by default when they do not feel prepared to vote on a particular issue, or sufficiently invested in it. Abstention should be presented to swing voters as an active, informed political choice. It maps well, for example, onto the political psyche of a conflicted swing voter who does not want to do harm toward the LGBT people she knows but also is not ready to break with the teachings of her faith tradition. This messaging strategy is fully explained in my January 2007 TDS article entitled [“Abstinance Education.”](#)²

Finally, these tactics should be evaluated for their efficacy after Election Day through follow-up interviews and focus groups with targeted swing voters.

Clearly, this new approach would require a reallocation of staffing resources and funding, but when we are running campaigns whose budgets range from \$4 million (“No on 1”) to \$40 million (“No on 8”), there has to be room for innovation. Each victory and each loss offer the opportunity for a more precise diagnostic process and for resulting innovations.

The lesson of Maine has been there all along, but was obscured by more immediate factors such as being behind in fundraising. On the one hand, this problem is a technical one, but it has broader implications about how we understand and approach the people who vote yes, which at this point is a majority of voting Americans. Ultimately, we need to build a movement that is open to all people and that proceeds from a radical assumption: all of us can be transformed by love.

I know that we don’t typically talk about love when we talk about politics. But what if we did?

A week after Election Day, I called the Maine couple with the motorcycle and scooter to see how they felt about the results. They both voted yes, the woman told me.

“Are you happy with the results?”

“Not in a zealous way,” she replied. “Voting yes felt closer to where I am now. I just couldn’t get over that final hump,” she said, due to both religious beliefs and her emotions. “I was watching

Ellen yesterday and I love Ellen. They were showing her wedding, though, and it just felt wrong to me. I don't know what to do. Basically, I'm stuck. I'm perplexed."

I thought about what she'd say about pictures from my wedding day. These moments are hard, and often become points of rupture at which conversations end. But I also wanted to know more. Her tone was warm and she knew something that I have struggled to comprehend: what it's like to feel conflicted about gay rights.

I asked her if there was anything in the world that could have changed her mind. "I don't know," she said. "I'm perplexed and it stresses me out."

"Why?"

"My grandson. I need to figure it out. But I'm stuck." she added. "I have lots of questions."

"If you'd had the option to not vote, or to leave the question blank, would you have done that?"

"Yes," she said, not missing a beat. As we said goodbye, she asked for a copy of this article.

I also followed up with another swing voter whom I'd met in September.

"I voted yes," he told me.

"Can you tell me more about that?"

"I support civil unions completely, but I just can't get behind calling it marriage. That's the issue for me. A marriage is between a man and a woman."

"Why do you believe that?"

"My church. I've been a Catholic for sixty-three years. It's not going to change in an election season."

"Given that you were conflicted, would you have considered leaving it blank and not voting on this issue?"

"I almost did. I thought about it long and hard," he said. "In fact I went into the ballot box not knowing how I was going to vote. I left Question 1 blank until the very end. I voted on all the other issues and then I just stood there and stared at the ballot."

"And then you voted yes."

"Yes."

"What made the difference for you in the final moment?"

"My church. I'm Catholic, and the Catholic church said to vote yes."

"How did it feel?"

“It was the hardest choice I made at the ballot box this year. It was very emotional. It might be the hardest choice I’ve ever made as a voter.”

We need to approach swing voters with conversations and options that are actually aligned with their beliefs and questions. We need to do so not just to start winning campaigns, but in the long-term interest of winning full equality in our public and private lives. These thirty-one losses have made two things clear: the majority of Americans are not yet ready to support gay marriage and a growing number of Americans are ready to do so, or are conflicted on the issue.

In 2004, the national leadership of the LGBT movement predicted that we could defeat these amendments in a majority of states and pave a path directly to a Supreme Court victory legalizing marriage on the federal level.

On paper, this strategy made sense. But in reality, it hasn’t worked. We have won significant victories in courts and on the legislative level, but we have not yet swayed the nation’s heart and mind. We know more now than we did in 2004, and we need to adjust our mindset and our strategies. Some are saying that we should disengage from future amendment campaigns because they are unwinnable. But what does this mean really? Opponents of gay marriage have momentum on their side; it looks like they are heading to New Hampshire next. Should we simply not show up?

There is an opportunity to see these thirty-one campaigns and the ones that will come next not as discrete efforts, but as one long campaign that also includes those places where we have won. Even with this losing record of ours, I feel deeply hopeful and even in the urgency of our work, I feel a certain patience. Time and again, I have seen people change, moving from fear and even hate to love. Not everyone will make this journey, but I believe that the majority of Americans will, if we find new ways to tell our story in our campaigns and in our lives.

Every community that has ever struggled for full recognition under the law knows that progress does not follow a long, smooth arc. It looks more like an EKG and involves suffering and sacrifice. It will be not different for LGBT people. So we move forward, holding within us the truth that we are fully human and thus entitled to the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Our nation’s laws – and many of our neighbors - do not yet recognize this truth. Part of our work is ensuring that they do. In this legal work, precedence is on our side. In this human work, love is. In both cases, the forces of history are also with us.

Such ideals frame our work and guide us forward. But we are also engaged in the realpolitik of a sharply contested political struggle. And here, we are the underdog. The good news and our great advantage is that we have lost so often, we have, literally, nothing else to lose. We can afford to loosen our grip on the playbook, and get serious about innovation. We should start with the specific project of how we talk with, and listen to, swing voters.

1 <http://www.theprogressiveproject.org/>

2 http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/ac/2007/01/abstinence_education.php