



February, 2004

Defeating the Alabama Tax Referendum

BY JOHN PUDNER

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CONSULTANTS' CORNER

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Late one evening, a conservative activist from rural Alabama took a wrong turn and found himself in a predominantly black section of Mobile. He scanned the neighborhood in the fading twilight, looking for the interstate, and was shocked by what he saw. The space in front of nearly every home displayed teal-and-yellow signs that read, "We are taxed enough -- Vote No September 9," the very same message touted on the bumper of his car.

This came as a surprise because many groups that usually produce black voters at the polls, including African Methodist Episcopal churches, were among the 108 organizations that had endorsed Gov. Bob Riley's 2003 tax package, known as Amendment One. Their signs proclaimed, "Do the right thing -- Vote Yes September 9."

The \$ 1.2 billion package was designed to close a \$ 675 million budget gap and finance improvements in the state's public school system, among other uses. Riley said the initiative would shift some of the tax burden from the poor to the wealthy. It would have raised the amount at which a family of four had to pay state income tax to \$ 17,000 from \$ 4,600 and also raised taxes for some industries. Opponents said there were no guarantees the money would be spent as promised.

The Amendment One campaign planned to spend about \$ 10 million, enough to saturate media markets statewide. A popular governor, the former three-term congressman, had a record of never voting for tax increases. He hoped to win the support from across the political spectrum from blacks to members of chambers of commerce to the national Christian Coalition.

I knew the Tax Accountability Coalition (TAC), which had hired me as general consultant to stop Amendment One, would have to put together a similarly unorthodox coalition. TAC was a group of hundreds of farmers, ALFA Insurance, SouthTrust Bank, the Alabama Forestry Association and leaders of the state's chapter of the National Federation for Independent Business and the Christian Coalition. During the first two days of the campaign, I had six conference calls with representatives of these groups and subcontractors. I had hired, 22 participants in all. My campaign manager quipped, "You have a lot of cats to herd."

We asked all these participants for input that first week. We had conference calls on everything from what messages were most effective in making our case to who should be talking to reporters. Knowing that we could not run the campaign by committee with 22 people weighing in on every decision, we gave everyone the opportunity to submit potential questions for our initial poll. However, we made it clear that once we

had tested the dozens of potential messages, we would settle the most effective two or three arguments and would not revisit the others.

As befits an Alabama campaign, I took my cue from Bear Bryant, only hiring "assistant coaches" (subcontractors) smarter than I was and whom I trusted to defuse any bad ideas I might have along the way. Some of these made up what I called the "Shotgun" team -- Republican pollster Verne Kennedy, strategist Mike Swinehart and TV producer Doug McAuliffe -- that collaborated on the overall message. This team was experienced in conveying broad anti-tax messages to the general public, which would help win Republicans and Independents.

The other was the Democratic "Rifle" team -- mail producer Rich Savage, researcher Jason Stanford and telemarketer Darren Katz -- that concentrated on targeted lists of voters. Because many Democrats believe the revenue is justified for education, health care and social services, the anti-tax message would not work. Therefore we needed to raise questions in their minds as to whether they could trust the Republican governor they had worked so hard to defeat the previous year to spend the money on legitimate needs if Amendment One passed.

Getting Through to Voters

My own political career began as a field operative, and I start any new campaign by going back to these roots for the widest possible intelligence network. We needed to get copies of materials proponents were distributing and when representatives of the governor's office or education association were speaking in time to counter their efforts with opponents.

The media chorus from the beginning sang our doom, predicting that the more voters learned, the more fervently they would embrace Amendment One. Early polls showed a single-digit margin in our favor when the question concerned the tax hike, while the opposition led by 10 when respondents heard the actual ballot language. Polling indicated that once it was revealed that only some people would pay higher taxes, support for Amendment One would swell to more than 60 percent.

According to TV commercials for Amendment One, 67 percent of the state's residents would pay the same or less income tax under the new plan, while big timber and wealthy landowners would no longer get away with not paying their fair share. These ads failed my basic test for message viability: would it be the topic of the average family's dinner table conversation? In all my years of talking to non-political people in social settings, I cannot recall any of them bemoaning problems caused by farmers and lumberjacks. I do remember many complaining about greedy politicians, substandard schools, and the cost of electricity and car repairs.

So, our first TV spot emphasized Amendment One's impact on these areas. We showed an elderly couple opening a higher utility bill. We sent a mailer challenging Democrats and Independents to call Riley's bluff on his claim that the money would go to education.

Proponents made the case that Amendment One would create a tax cut, because the majority of the population would get lower tax bills. Therefore our message to Republicans focused on the overall size of the tax hike (\$ 1.2 billion) at the same time President Bush was arguing for tax cuts and voters were receiving their child tax credit refunds.

The Final Push

Even though our lead grew as high as 33 points a week before the election, we knew that most people don't vote on an off-year, off-month, single-issue referendum. Our opposition had a good chance of getting voters to the polls through their massive turnout apparatus well entrenched in most churches and schools. For us, however, only telemarketing could help us pinpoint which voters were likely to vote no.

Since many people dislike telemarketers, we started calls by assuring the voter we were not trying to sell them anything and that the call would only last 70 seconds. We then asked whether they planned to vote yes or no on Amendment One. About 25 percent of the people we reached hung up; because they didn't even know whether we were the proponents or opponents, we did not risk losing a vote.

Most of the other 75 percent were quite friendly, perhaps happy to finally talk to someone who wanted their opinion instead of a telemarketer trying to sell them something. Vic Gresham supervised Conquest Communication calls to Republican voters, while Darren Katz supervised Edison Group calls to Democratic voters, trying different scripts until they were winning over most undecided voters during the 70 seconds. After the firms had called the 370,000 households most likely to vote, we turned to Gabe Joseph of ccAdvertising to make automated-interactive calls to the other 1.2 million households in the state for which we had phone numbers.

By the weekend before the vote, our telemarketing had yielded 398,000 households that opposed Amendment One (about 676,600 votes). Additionally, we targeted 101,000 black undecided/unknown voters, because our polling indicated that while almost all white voters had made up their minds one way or the other, almost a third of black voters were still undecided. We then planned to call all 499,000 house-holds Saturday, Monday and Election Day.

We swept every black precinct in Mobile and Birmingham. Statewide we took home 866,623 votes to the opposition's 416,310.

Not bad for a herd of cats.