

Winning Edge #5 – How NOT to be Persuaded with Numbers

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners' *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.



Last time we talked about How to Persuade with Numbers. But how can you tell when numbers are persuading YOU?

This time we are looking at How NOT to be Persuaded with Numbers.

Most often when presented with a number that is not true, it's rarely a complete lie. Usually, it is a defensible half-truth that makes it harder to figure out what's real and what's not really true.

Whenever you look at data, there are two big things to remember.

First, it's all subjective. Because people were involved at the start, there were subjective decisions made on what to include and what not to include.

Second, all data in the world has one thing in common. It's from the past. It's a snapshot in time—a reflection of what has been, but not always what will be.

So how do you tell if you are being persuaded?

The good news is, if you have used your phone's camera you already have the intuitive tools to find out if you are being persuaded with bad data.

Say you hear that 7.7% of teachers are quitting and not returning to work next year. How do you judge if this is true and something you should be concerned about?

Thinking of the number like a picture makes it easier to see if you are being persuaded.

(So, bear with me with this analogy...this works.)

The first thing to do is the **Selfie Test**.

Ask, "Is it a selfie?" And by "selfie," we mean is the organization or person reporting the numbers the same one that compiled the numbers. Another way to look at it, "Is this self-reported data, or is it data from a more objective 3rd party?"

Just like when someone takes a dozen photos and only posts the best-looking one, people do the same with self-reported data all the time. They measure a dozen things but only report on the one that fits the narrative.

For the 7.7% number, you see it was calculated from government data by an outside 3rd party group. Depending on your view of the group, you might know that while it's not a selfie, they may look at the data with a certain perspective.

The next test is called the **Zoom Test**.

Would the number look different if you could zoom in closer? Or if you could zoom out further and see more context?

Remember data is just a snapshot in time, so sometimes being able to zoom in or out changes how you interpret the data.

For the 7.7% number, if you zoomed out, you'd see it's the "highest ever recorded." You would also see there's only a decade of data and it was basically at the same level in 2014 when the data was first tracked.

Now you could also zoom in on the data and see what is driving the 7.7%. You'd see that there's actually a lot of variability in the rate. Some areas have only about 2% of teachers leaving, and others have over 16%. There's also high variance based on the school type and the race and gender of the teachers who are leaving.

The third test you could use is the **Crop Test** – ask what's been cut out or left out?

Just like when you look at a photo, and it seems like someone's been cropped out, think about what might be missing or not reported. Usually, this is some context about what the number could mean. For example, how does this number of teachers leaving compare to other industries? A glance at other industries shows teachers leave at a much lower rate than many other professional fields.

The next test is the **Video Test** – should this be just a photo or would a video be better?

Just like how videos often give more context than a single photo, sometimes a data series could give more context. For the teacher data, two years ago was the lowest rate with 5.4% of teachers leaving; now it's 7.7%. Could this be natural variability?

The final test is the **Like Test** – what's your emotional reaction to the data?

If it was a photo, would you smash the "like" button? Or would you be calling BS as soon as you saw it?

When you are skeptical and don't want the data to be true, you are immediately on the lookout for flaws and inconsistencies.

Here's the counterintuitive thing about data. We are less skeptical when we want to smash that "like" button. When we have a strong positive reaction, we want the data to be true, and that's when you are most susceptible to being persuaded with bad data.

The next time you think you are being persuaded by a number, think of the number as a photo and ask:

- **The Selfie Test** – Is the number self-reported and presented in the best light possible?
- **The Zoom Test** – How different is the number if I zoom in or zoom out?
- **The Crop Test** – What is missing or has been excluded from the number?
- **The Video Test** – Would the interpretation be different if you looked at the trend rather than a single point?
- **The Like Test** – Do you want the number to be true, or are you immediately looking to pick it apart?

Use these 5 tests to prevent yourself from being persuaded with numbers and give yourself the winning edge.