

Voice of the Voter

A few days after election day, I sat behind the glass in a focus group room, listening to voters talk about the election. **"I never got a chance to figure out the election."** That's what one registered Iowa voter said when asked why she didn't vote. Another voter said, **"I didn't have time to figure it out."** Several others used phrases similar to **"figure it out."**

These insights came from one-on-one interviews in Iowa and Wisconsin for a research project I worked on after the 2014 election. We were studying why targeted voters didn't vote. In both states, we heard that same phrase repeatedly. It was just the way normal people talked about it.

Several years later, in another campaign on a casino proposal, I conducted one-on-one interviews with voters the summer before the election. In those interviews, voters kept describing the casino developer as **"shady."** The feeling made sense because of the developer's questionable business dealings, but the word stood out. It struck us as odd since most people hadn't used that word in 5-10 years. But if that's how voters described it, why not embrace it?

We ended up featuring the word **"shady"** as the campaign's central theme. It also helped that the developer's first name, Shawn, made a great alliteration—**Shady Shawn**. Ultimately, we got over 70% of the vote despite being outspent over 4 to 1.



The Power of the Voter's Voice

One of the most underappreciated aspects of talking with voters—whether in a focus group setting or one-on-one at their door—is hearing the actual words voters use to describe election issues. Not the words consultants use, not the words candidates use, but the actual words voters use to describe the problem. In marketing copywriting, this is called "voice of the customer" writing—in politics, it's the "voice of the voter."

As you're going door to door, each conversation has the potential to give you an advantage.

Listen closely to your voters' specific words when they talk about the economy, inflation, crime, or the fentanyl epidemic.

If you hear a phrase that keeps coming up repeatedly - write it down. These "voice of the voter" phrases are powerful because they are how ordinary people talk about the issue.

Once you start hearing a recurring phrase, incorporate it into your campaign messaging. Put it on a mailing, use it in your stump speech, and use it in an interview.

