

Winning Edge #34 – Voice of the Voter

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



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.

Turning Voter Language into Campaign Strategy

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 4 to 1.

The Power of the Voter's Voice

One of the most underappreciated aspects of talking with voters—whether in a sterile 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.

For several years, we used the phrase "help you figure out the election" on mailers to undecided voters and gave them information about both candidates.

Using voters' own phrases is powerful because it shows you understand their concerns. You create an instant connection when you frame the election's challenges in their words. This makes your solution—voting for you or your candidate—feel more authentic and relatable. Voters are more likely to trust and support a candidate who speaks their language and gets their perspective.

Your Action Plan

Listen to what the voters say as you knock on doors in the next 70-plus days before the election. What are the regional phrases? What words are they using to describe inflation, the economy, or crime? Listen to the words they use when talking about these issues.

When you hear a phrase three to four times, write it down and use those exact words in your campaign materials or messaging to give yourself the Winning Edge.