

Winning Edge #62 – Letting voters change their minds

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



Twenty days before the 1980 election, Ronald Reagan's campaign faced a defining question.

Should he debate President Carter one last time or risk letting the race slip away?

In a memo to the campaign team, Jim Baker captured the dilemma:

“We have 20 days left. My gut tells me the momentum is not with us. Carter is dominating the news as only a President can... Our problem wit[h] the additional six or seven percent we need is convincing them that [Reagan] is competent, compassionate, and not dangerous.”

Baker added that while his instinct was not to debate, *“with the numbers doing what they're doing, I'm beginning to wonder if we don't need it.”*

Reagan was flooded with advice on what to do and what to say. Even former President Nixon sent him an 11-page letter with suggested lines and strategies.

Among all the messages, one memo captured what voters were really looking for: not policy details but a connection.

“The voter wants to know whether a given candidate shares the individual voter's concerns, experiences, and hopes... To the extent possible statements should not be in terms of billions of dollars and millions of jobs; but in supermarket food basket terms. It is a simple equation, who watching the debate feels better off today than four years ago? Can they afford four more years? Ronald Reagan offers a return to prosperity.”

Reagan took the advice to heart. With one week to go, and Gallup showing him down three points with likely voters, he faced President Carter on stage while more than 80 million Americans tuned in.

In his closing statement, Reagan said:

“Next Tuesday all of you will go to the polls. You'll stand there in the polling place and make a decision. I think when you make that decision it might be well if you would ask yourself: **Are you better off than you were four years ago?**”

After that final debate, Gallup found Reagan had gained roughly six points, turning the three-point deficit into a three-point lead. On Election Day, that margin held. Across the country, millions of voters asked themselves the same question and decided it was time for a change.

Reagan's debate line became one of the most effective closing arguments in modern campaign history and a great example of political persuasion.

When crafting your own closing message, think about what made Reagan's question so powerful.

Throughout the campaign there had been endless debate about statistics and facts. But people tend to make decisions based on a feeling first and logic second. There is an old saying: *“We buy on emotion and justify with facts.”*

That is what made Reagan's question so brilliant. It gave voters permission to change their minds. You could have voted for Jimmy Carter in 1976 and felt you were right, but now you were being asked a simple question. Are you better off than you were four years ago? If the answer was no, you could change your mind and still be right again.

When creating your final campaign message, follow three steps:

1. Decide the emotion you want voters to feel.
2. Make it safe for them to change their mind.
3. Provide a simple fact they can use to explain their decision to themselves and others.

Reagan did not tell voters what to think. He asked them what they felt. And that's how you win hearts and elections.

Bottom Line: The best closing argument is about finding the question or feeling that lets voters feel right choosing you, not some new policy or promise.

Source: [Ronald Reagan Library Archives](#)