

# Fear, Uncertainty, & Doubt



Over 50 years ago, Gene Amdahl, a former IBM engineer, created the acronym FUD to describe the sales tactics used by IBM. FUD, he said, stood for Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt. This combination of mixing fear of the future or missing out, uncertainty about what decision to make, and doubt about the competitor was standard practice for IBM's sales team.

For good or ill, the acronym stuck. It's been used in sales, and political campaigns ever since. And while it can be effective, it should be used sparingly.

## Virginia Election



Last week, Virginia voters went to the polls to vote on a redistricting plan that changed the congressional districts to a 10-1 map that favored Democratic candidates.

**More than \$80 million was spent, making it the most expensive ballot fight in Virginia history.**

The pro-redistricting “Yes” side won by less than 2 percentage points. But even with all that spending, interviews of voters leaving the polls found many were still uncertain about what they had just voted on.

Why? Because of FUD messaging.

Both sides used the tactic.

On the Yes side, the messaging was all about protecting democracy and stopping Trump, including ads of President Obama endorsing the Yes vote.

The ballot language itself was political and asked voters whether they wanted to “restore fairness,” wording a circuit court judge actually ruled was misleading.

They even sent voters mailers disguised as “local newspapers” that mixed pro-Yes messaging next to recipes and articles.

On the No side, they hammered three themes: protecting your right to vote, stopping the Democratic power grab, and not letting rural Virginia become Northern Virginia. Some ads showed a 2017 clip of Obama condemning gerrymandering, leaving voters with the impression he was against the ballot question he'd endorsed.

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## What is FUD?

FUD is crafting your message in a way that **maximizes the fear** of not acting, the **uncertainty** about what happens if the other side wins, and the **doubt** cast on what your opponents are saying. It makes an appeal to emotion, rather than fact. It can be used effectively, but **it should be used sparingly**.

## 3 Ways To Use FUD



### One-off Decisions

One-off decisions like ballot questions, where voters don't have a party label to fall back on and only encounter the issue through ads. The Virginia referendum is a textbook example.



### Playing Defense

Getting voters to hesitate, or stick with the status quo is a lower bar than getting them to take action. The No side in Virginia got within 2 points despite being outspent 3-to-1 because they only had to plant doubt, not build support.



### Issue based, not person based

FUD works best when you focus on the consequences of a policy, not the actions of an opponent. This is especially true when running against an incumbent. To defeat an incumbent, you have to win over people who voted for them last time. Telling those voters they were wrong about the person feels like an attack on their judgment.

*Remember, we all want to be right about our decisions and past votes. Admitting we were wrong about a person feels like admitting we were fooled. But it's easier to admit a policy isn't working because situations change. It allows the voter to be right again without feeling like they changed their mind.*

**A word of caution:** FUD on its own only gives voters reasons to be against something. ***It doesn't give them a reason to be for you.*** But be sure to pair it with a positive message about what you'll actually do when elected.

## The Bottom Line

FUD can persuade people on one-off decisions, when playing defense, and with issue-based arguments. Just use it sparingly in your campaign.