

Campaigns & Elections

Values, Timing and Breaking the 'Rules'

by Joe Slade White and Ben Nuckels / Oct 13 2011

The unconventional campaign that helped Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn secure an improbable win.



“It is impossible to overstate the depth of the challenge we face.”

Those were the first words from the lips of Illinois Governor Pat Quinn’s (D) soon-to-be departed primary election pollster at a March briefing. He wasn’t kidding.

Quinn was enjoying a double-digit lead in the primary before being attacked on a controversy surrounding early prison release. At the time, the response of Quinn’s consulting team was, essentially, a non-response. They lost that double-digit lead, and barely survived the primary.

It was no way to enter a general election campaign.

What’s more, over the next seven months, just two of the 32 public opinion polls released showed Governor Quinn in the lead. And just about every major political prognosticator pronounced our campaign dead in the water. At one point, Nate Silver—the political prediction guru at the *New York Times*—gave Quinn only a 9.4 percent chance of winning the election.

So how did the pundits and insiders have it so wrong? How did the Quinn campaign get outspent by over a million dollars on TV in the last eight weeks and still pull off a victory? And how did Quinn win, while the Democratic candidate to fill President Barack Obama’s old Senate seat lost?

From the start, we knew this wasn’t a conventional race that was going to be won with a conventional game plan and the campaign’s media strategy was

structured around that reality. From our vantage point, Quinn's upset victory over Republican state Sen. Bill Brady came down to four key factors: a focus on character and values, good timing, engaging on social issues and a willingness on the campaign's part to break the rules.

Character & Values

Pat Quinn is a man of deep integrity and a skilled leader. He has been a passionate fighter for working families his entire life. As governor, Quinn was faced with some tough governing decisions after ascending to the post following the impeachment of disgraced former Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

Throughout the race, Brady tried to use Blagojevich to bring down Quinn, but our research showed the attacks simply didn't stick. Voters knew Quinn was independent from the former governor, and we even had Blagojevich saying Quinn wasn't part of his administration. That was the good news.

But going into the job, one of the tough decisions Quinn had to make was advocating for an increase in the state income tax. It wasn't your typical campaign platform, especially in an election year dominated by jobs and the economy. And, as it turned out, a Republican tidal wave would sweep many safer Democrats with easier races, out of office. But that's what we were faced with.

Knowing that executive offices are often won and lost on a candidate's character and values, we drove that debate with a series of paid media spots against Brady, always posing the same question to voters: "Who is this guy?"

By tying each policy issue and legislative vote to Brady's values and worldview, we were able to define him as someone voters should be uncomfortable with. The spot we crafted on Brady's support to lower the minimum wage, for example, wasn't just about lowering the minimum wage. It was about painting Brady as an out-of-touch multi-millionaire who doesn't understand the struggles of everyday people. It was also about Brady's values, demonstrating how he might look at other problems should he win the governor's office.

Contrast that to our positive spots in the final weeks of the race. They were all about Quinn's character and values. This was our trump card. Throughout his life Quinn has worked to earn his reputation as an honest leader who was never afraid to speak up and battle special interests on behalf of everyday men and women. In an age of cynicism, Quinn's low-key authenticity and reputation as an honest leader proved a powerful weapon. Our positive spots tried to capture that essence and remind voters that this was the guy who fought as a reformer and consumer advocate on behalf of middle-class Illinois families for decades.

One spot featured Quinn at a Ford plant talking about “the very best way to help people”—a job. Another spot had Quinn direct-to-camera saying, “You know me. I’ve been a fighter all my life. I fought the big utilities and saved consumers billions.” Yet another focused on veterans and education. This was the contrast we sought: “You know me,” versus, “Who is this guy?”

Bill Brady was defined, by his campaign, as a two-dimensional candidate—a relatively unknown, flat figure. They allowed us to fill in the third dimension: emotional depth. With Quinn, we sought to appeal to the heads and hearts of voters to establish a stronger connection. It worked.

When asked by his hometown newspaper why he lost, Brady answered, “Evidently, we didn’t earn enough trust yet.” That was the focus of our paid advertising.

It’s All About the Timing

To win an “impossible” campaign, timing is everything and given where Quinn stood in the polls over the summer, we knew we needed to design momentum into our campaign strategy on multiple levels. Peaking too soon would be fatal. Campaigns that depend solely on a sudden surge of emotional momentum, too early and without strongly anchoring their lines, risk being blown off the mountain by the first strong gust of negative that comes their way. Emotional surges are central to every upset—but the timing must be perfect and it needs to happen as late as possible.

With that in mind, the first thing we did was to hold off spending money as much as possible throughout the summer in order to maximize our impact on TV in the last eight weeks. Insiders and pundits had already written off the campaign as a sure loser, but we had a rule, and we stuck to it: If Brady went up on Chicago TV in a serious way we would match him, otherwise we would hold our money until voters really started paying attention.

Like the classic fable of “The Tortoise and the Hare,” Brady and his advisers thought they had it won. Brady didn’t go up with a serious ad buy in the Chicago media market and we held fast. The strategy paid off big by allowing us to put more money on the airwaves when it mattered most—the final eight weeks of the race.

When it came to the spots we did put on the air, we took a measured approach, carefully crafting the rollout of each TV ad. We did not lead our media campaign with our strongest negative against Brady—the fact that our millionaire opponent didn’t have to pay any federal income taxes for two straight years. Nor did we

combine all of our most potent attacks into a single ad, as is typical.

Instead, we wanted to build momentum against our opponent brick by brick, issue by issue. We knew that if we first set up Brady as the Porsche-driving millionaire who wanted to lower the minimum wage, it would make our spot on Brady not paying any federal income taxes for two straight years even more powerful. After we ran the spot on Brady's taxes, we continued to hammer home the point with voters by beginning subsequent spots with, "Remember politician Bill Brady? The millionaire who somehow didn't pay any federal income taxes? Now we find out..."

Each spot ended with a question: "Who is this guy?" The goal was to have voters asking themselves that question. When we presented new facts on Brady, they would stick because it would be fitting a certain pattern of behavior. "Who is this guy?" implicitly says: "Who would do something like that? I don't know this guy. He's a stranger to me, and now I'm finding out things that he's keeping from me?"

Finally, we knew from our research we could only raise Quinn's favorable ratings a finite amount given the beating he weathered in his primary fight. If we raised his favorable ratings too early with positive media, we'd be stuck, but if we waited until the last 15 days it would allow us real movement against Brady. The goal was to make sure Brady was at the same level as Quinn with unfavorable ratings and then with a last minute injection of positive media, we would play our trump card—highlighting Quinn's character and values and shoot above Brady for real momentum on Election Day.

The strategy paid off and that's exactly what happened.

Engaging on Social Issues

In a year when almost every pollster in the nation was saying, "Only talk about jobs and the economy," a significant portion of our paid communication never once mentioned jobs or the economy. We knew this was the way to win based on Quinn's general election pollster Mark Mellman's careful research. It all went back to our character and values-based media, which was about making Brady unacceptable to voters on key social issues like education investments and guns.

Our first ad in the Chicago area highlighted Brady's vote to allow guns in or near schools. But it wasn't just about guns. It was also about what type of person would take such a vote. To the Democratic base, the spot was about a candidate who seemed extreme—a candidate who didn't seem to care about homicide or violence in the city. On another level, the spot was about the fact that Brady had a very different set of cultural values.

We reprised a variation of this ad in the final five days of the campaign, defining Brady on his vote against a ban on the sale of guns to convicted spouse and child abusers. Among women in the Chicago area, this tested as the top reason to cast a vote against Brady last November. But we didn't want to run the ad in the general market. Instead, we blitzed all of the women's programming on cable networks throughout the Chicago media market in the final five days with no response from our opponent. It was especially effective with persuadable women voters in suburban Cook County and the surrounding suburban "collar" counties—voters any Republican statewide candidate needs to win over to be victorious.

We closed with a positive spot, but even there we made sure to include key social issues. Direct-to-camera Quinn said, "I won't cut our schools, I won't cut our police and I won't cut our veterans to give a tax break to the wealthy."

Breaking the Rules

Outdated assumptions account for most campaign fatalities. But the Quinn campaign showed a willingness to break the rules. Despite being on the ropes, we stayed off the airwaves until the very end. And once we finally went up, we didn't lead with our top-testing negative, nor did we combine multiple issues in every ad.

In many instances, we only bought cable in multiple downstate markets while our opponent was attacking us on broadcast television. We wanted to advertise more heavily in the Chicago area—where our voters lived. We took on social issues when everyone said all we should be talking about was jobs and the economy. We used innovative media strategy, blitzing women's programming on Chicago cable stations in the final days, and targeting key African-American voters in downstate Illinois on cable programming. We didn't run a heavy direct mail campaign in small communities.

We also refused to respond directly to all but one of Bill Brady's attacks. And when we did respond, we did it calmly and firmly, linking our response ad directly to Pat Quinn's values and character. We turned the response into a powerful positive statement, and our tracking polling showed that the ad turned the tide.

In the end, Real Clear Politics named Quinn's victory as one of the biggest upsets in the country this past cycle—the only governor's race to make the list. Governor Quinn never gave up and he had the courage to let us break the "rules," when no one thought we had any chance of winning. Advice and counsel by the governor's brother Tom was invaluable during the toughest decisions. We were also aided by the great team of Mark Mellman on polling, David Rosen on fundraising, Trish Hoppey and Hal Malchow on direct mail, and Dennis Gragert

and Robert Dietz on research. Together with an incredible campaign staff, key supporters, a great campaign chairman, and a truly admirable candidate, we all pulled together to bring this one home.

Joe Slade White was the general election media consultant for Gov. Pat Quinn in 2010 and is the president of Joe Slade White & Company. Ben Nuckels was the general election campaign manager for Quinn. He is currently the vice president of Joe Slade White & Company. They can be reached at contact@joesladewhite.com