

Qualitative Research: The Political Secret Sauce

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Although political polling has become the official scorekeeper during election time, why do we hear so little about the role of qualitative research in shaping the messages of candidates and ballot issues? All that we hear is that a candidate's message has been "focused-grouped" or we see up to 24 "respondents," sitting in a television studio, providing insights in what cable TV calls a "focus group."

There is a lot more qualitative research being conducted for political campaigns and on public policy issues, but because there are no "horse-race" numbers to report, qualitative is generally off the radar for most media outlets. The underlying issue may be that "most reporters really don't understand qualitative and so they usually won't cover it," according to Celinda Lake, a top Democratic strategist and president of Lake Research.

While political qualitative research remains mostly undetected to the outside world, it is often a powerful force within many political campaigns, the secret sauce of success that political consultants use to develop the basic building blocks of a political campaign. Much of the front-end work is dedicated to the "emerging trends before they emerge." In this type of work, Lake seeks "an understanding of how people think, the connections that they make, and a sense of how people relate public policy to their own personal lives."

Getting a campaign to conduct qualitative research can be a hard sell, but "if people have the budget, there is never any resistance," Anna Greenberg, a Democratic consultant and principal at Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research noted. "In some ways, qualitative is easier to understand than quantitative. You give the client the book of data

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Brand Clarity is a process by which consumers reveal the essence of a brand to make sure that the products and services being offered are closely aligned to their needs.



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tables and it seems like a different language. Whereas focus groups are actually fairly easy to understand. They can sit behind the glass and watch people talk.”

The differences between consumer and political work mean that political neophytes often “miss the nuance and context” of politics, according to Bill McInturff, co-founder of Public Opinion Strategies and consultant to GOP candidates. Greenberg said that while traditional “market research is, in a lot of ways, more sophisticated, if you look at the methodologies, it’s often less strategic.” Political campaigns are often won or lost based the consultant’s work, so their research “tends to be much more strategic and less descriptive.”

While many people may consider candidate campaigns to be the dominant form of political consulting, non-partisan referendums, as well as public policy issues that may never come to a public vote, are lucrative areas for qualitative political consultants. “Candidate work is more complex,” reports McInturff, “because candidates are real people. Voters have incredibly nuanced reactions to other real people, so at a non-verbal level, they’re picking up huge cues about how they see that person.”

One of the biggest challenges political researchers face is the break-neck speed at which major decisions need to be made. While these consultants try to set appropriate expectations ahead of time, in the long-run, political consultants must keep pace with the warp speed at which campaigns run. Bill McInturff explains that campaigns are under “enormous pressure to make decisions with sometimes very incomplete amounts of data. We make increasingly important decisions with less and less information.”

With candidate work, because a person’s career is often on the line, it is not surprising that the QRC gets a very high level of engagement from his or her clients. Some relationships between the consultants

and the campaign professionals run very deep; a candidate once summed up his relationship to McInturff: "I see you as being kind of the confessional."

