



The Pot of Gold

October 2000 Edition

By M. Dane Waters ¹

Many people have made the assertion that the increase use of ballot measures has spawned the “initiative industrial complex” and that political consultants are the impetus behind ballot measures and not the citizens.

I would like to say for the record that this assertion is unfounded except for one caveat – consultants all over the country *are* running to the “pot of gold” at the end of the rainbow to try and cash in on the big dollars being spent on ballot measure campaigns.

Who could blame these consultants when they know that almost 400 hundred million dollars was spent on ballot measure campaigns in 1998 alone. But here is the problem, consultants are under the misguided notion that ballot measure campaigns represent easy money and that if they can win a candidate campaign they can win a ballot measure campaign.

Candidate campaigns and ballot measure campaigns are miles apart in character and consultants need to realize this before they jump headfirst into the uncharted waters of a ballot measure campaign.

First, consultants must realize that only 40% of all ballot measures are adopted by the voters which means that running a “yes” campaign can be a daunting task. At least in candidate campaigns you have a 50/50 chance of winning at the general election. This points out the first main difference. In candidate campaigns the voter has to make a choice between candidate “A” or candidate “B”. When voters are voting on a ballot measure they tend to be conservative and if uncertain vote to maintain the status quo – in short they vote no when in doubt.

Second, consultants must realize that they are trying to sell the voters a piece of paper. Paper by definition has no personality and no emotions. You can’t hype the prior accomplishments of a piece of paper nor can you depend on its warm charm and ability to “feel the pain” of the voters. You must create voices for the paper and without those voices the measure will fail. However, one thing you can count one is that a ballot measure doesn’t lie — it does what it says it will do.

Third, consultants must realize that the phrase “guilt by association” is more prevalent in ballot measure campaigns than in candidate campaigns. Since a piece of paper has no personality and accomplishments, many voters will take their “cue” on how to vote from who is supporting the measure. For example, if a measure is supported by “rich special interest” the voters typically view the ballot measure with suspicion for they are curious as to what benefits those interest might be receiving from the measure. Additionally, since a ballot measure has no “baggage” of its own then the voters can be swayed by the “baggage” of those who endorse the ballot measure. In short, be careful of who you ask to support and endorse your ballot measure.

¹ Dane is President and Founder of the Initiative & Referendum Institute, a non-profit non-partisan educational and research organization dedicated to the study of the initiative and referendum process.

Fourth, in many candidate campaigns consultants will take on a candidate that is 20 or 30 points down and in many cases turn the election around. In ballot measure campaigns that is extremely rare. There are cases in which a ballot measure has had less than 50% support and come back to win, but in most cases if a ballot measure doesn't have 70% support at the beginning there is a tremendous chance that the measure will lose on election day. All the opposition has to do is raise voter doubt by sending confusing messages and the voters will take the cautious route and vote no. So don't think that you can ride in on your white horse and save the day – it is a lot harder than you think.

You can't blame consultants for wanting a piece of the action – they are in business to make money. More money is being spent on ballot measure campaigns every election cycle primarily due to the increased difficulty in placing measures on the ballot. However, before rushing to the “pot of gold” the consultants need to do their homework and realize that a ballot measure campaign is different than a candidate campaign. If they try and view them as the same then they and the ballot measure will be on the losing side.