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How to Beat an Incumbent

The Hard-Fought Senate Race in South Dakota in 1996

SEN. LARRY PRESSLER (R) VS. TIM JOHNSON (D)

Karl Struble

Only one U.S. Senate challenger defeated an incumbent in 1996. He was also the first to beat a Senate committee chairman in twelve years. And despite running in a state with a Republican majority where Bob Dole beat Bill Clinton, he was the first Democrat to oust a Republican Senator in six years. That is what Tim Johnson and the team he assembled accomplished on November 5.

Looking for the Differences

First, let's start with a few basic truths about elections. All campaigns are about differences. Those differences can be about policy, personality, values, experience, party, gender, race . . . you name it. Voters, however, take these differences and interpret them, attributing them to character traits like smart, honest, effective or "cares about people like me." Ask any voter why they support a candidate. The reasons given are almost never "voted for the ABM treaty" or "reformed welfare"; they are usually a list of character traits. Good campaigns decide what character traits they wish to own and which traits they wish to associate with their opponent. Thinking about an election this way forces a campaign to examine differences between candidates as voters do, rather than dissecting and communicating arcane issue differences only elites understand or care about.

It may be surprising, but virtually every major office incumbent who loses does so because he or she lacks one crucial character trait: "cares about

people like me." The electorate concludes that the incumbent has lost touch and is not on their side. This alienation from the electorate normally happens for one of three reasons: 1) scandal, 2) issue differences, or 3) incumbent arrogance. In the case of U.S. Senators, this arrogance normally shows up as having "gone Washington," and the abuse of the perks and privileges of office.

Often candidates with serious ethical problems decide not to run again, like Sen. Don Riegle (D, Mich.) or Sen. Alan Cranston (D, Calif.). Gov. Ed DiPrete (R) of Rhode Island, whom we helped defeat in 1990, lost because his administration was embroiled in a kickback scandal that destroyed the electorate's trust. In a case like this, the challenger, our candidate Bruce Sundlun, only had to appear to be a credible alternative to win. Other times, like in the 1991 victory for the New Democratic Party of British Columbia, Canada, it is necessary to remind voters of the incumbent's record of scandals to make sure the electorate acts on the need for change.

The second way incumbents go down is when the opponent is able to sharpen the candidates' differences on issues, demonstrating that the officeholder is not on the voters' side. Tom Daschle's election in 1986 over incumbent Sen. Jim Abdnor (R, S.D.) is an example of the use of issue differences. In this election, we used the farm crisis and farm policy along with Social Security as validators that Jim Abdnor had lost touch with average South Dakotans.

Larry Pressler bit the dust for the third reason. We documented Larry's arrogance and abuse of office. We made his conduct and indulgence in the perks and privileges of his incumbency "the issue" in the race. We made him own this trait, driving a wedge between him and his constituents. Often more than one reason is combined to prove an incumbent is unfit for office. Or one reason works off others, as you will see in the Johnson-Pressler Senate race.

Assets and Liabilities

To learn how to sell your arguments to the public, you must analyze what assets and liabilities you and your opponent have, and what their effect on the race will be. In South Dakota, incumbent Senator Pressler had five significant advantages:

- 1) Pressler was popular. He possessed a 65 percent favorability rating and had never lost an election in twenty-two years.
- 2) South Dakota is a Republican state where GOP identifiers outnumber Democrats 46 percent to 36 percent.
- 3) Pressler was ideologically conservative in a state where conservatives outnumber liberals by better than two to one.

Tim Johnson's "Message Box"

TIM ON TIM

Tim Johnson is different from most politicians. He's on our side. He's taken on the powerful to fight for the needs of average South Dakota families.

- votes to protect Medicare and education
- fights for family farmers and water projects
- plan to hold down pharmaceutical costs
- raise minimum wage
- v-chip/cleaning up the Internet

TIM ON LARRY

Larry Pressler has changed. He's gone too Washington and sold out South Dakota families to promote policies that benefit the rich and powerful.

- votes to cut Medicare, education, farm programs
- votes to give tax breaks to the rich and corporations
- junkets, first-class travel, abuse of office, and campaign finances

LARRY ON LARRY

Larry Pressler is a common sense conservative. He is changing Washington to get government off the backs of South Dakota families and re-establishing traditional family values.

- passed Telecom bill
- helped pass welfare reform
- pro balanced budget amendment

LARRY ON TIM

Tim Johnson is a liberal. He supports the tax and spend policies that are ruining our economy and permissive values that are destroying the American family.

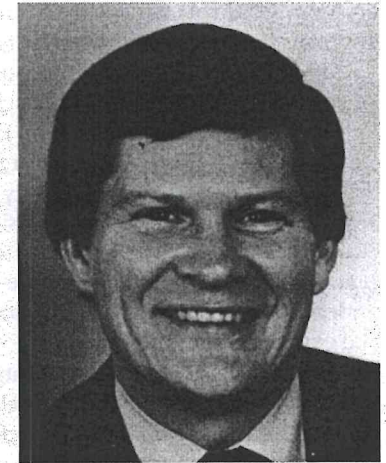
- votes against a balanced budget, welfare reform, and tax cuts
- abortion

- 4) As a senior senator and committee chairman, Pressler had clout and a commendable record of delivering money and projects to the state.
- 5) Finally, Pressler had a significant resource advantage. He started with half a million in the bank, out-raised us in every quarter, and out-spent us \$4.4 million to \$2.9 million.

In most cases, those advantages would be enough for an incumbent to be reelected. However, our candidate was not like most challengers, and we were not without assets of our own. Tim Johnson, as the state's lone Con-



Larry Pressler



Tim Johnson

gressman, had been elected statewide five times. He started with even better personal favorability numbers than Pressler—with 74 percent positive and only 16 percent negative. We had an experienced campaign team of consultants and staff who had worked together for years and knew how to win in South Dakota.

Most importantly, we had a great candidate. Tim Johnson, while not charismatic, was a good Congressman who shared the values of average people and had not forgotten who he represented. He oozed sincerity, was straightforward, a good father and husband—in short, just the kind of friend or neighbor you would like to have, someone you could trust. He was also committed to the race, focused on doing what was needed to win, and disciplined.

As we looked at our assets and liabilities, we saw that our candidate possessed the personal discipline that all challengers need. We had to overcome party, ideology, and money barriers, and we could only do that if we were smarter with our money and more focused with our message.

After months of research on our record and Senator Pressler's, several focus groups, two benchmark surveys, and countless meetings and discussions, we set our strategy and message. More than a year before the election, we constructed a "message box" and then set out to execute it. We chose to exploit the opposition's weakness on junkets, personal use of campaign funds, and abuse of perks as proof that Pressler had "changed" (see "Tim on Larry"). We theorized that it would then be easier to get voters to believe

Pressler would vote with powerful special interests and hurt average South Dakotans if they first perceived he had become too "Washington."

Conversely, we portrayed Johnson as what he is: the "Ward Cleaver" of South Dakota politics: a solid citizen with good family values who stands up for the little guy (see "Tim on Tim"). Unlike many Democratic challengers, we eschewed the "too extreme" argument on Pressler because it was less believable. Instead, we went directly to the question of who is on your side.

We also anticipated what Pressler wanted to say about himself (see "Larry on Larry") and what he wanted voters to believe about Johnson (see "Larry on Tim"). It should never be underestimated how important it is to understand what your opponent's message is going to be when formulating and executing your own strategy.

The great Chinese philosopher and warrior Sun Tzu wrote, in *The Art of War*, that if you do not know yourself and you do not know your opponent you will be imperiled in every single battle; if you know yourself, but do not know your opponent, you will win one battle and lose the next; but if you know yourself and you know your opponent, "you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles."

The simple exercise of filling out the four quadrants of a message box is quite illuminating and forces campaigns to understand themselves and their opponent. It can help enforce discipline on your campaign and gives structure to virtually every campaign activity from press releases to literature to paid media.

Plus, if you understand the opposition strategy, you will often know whether to counter an attack or ignore it because it is off message. This was particularly important in this race because Pressler's resource advantage meant we could not always respond.

In our judgment, we needed to save our resources for the end. They wanted a long war, to exploit their resource advantage. We wanted a short war to make our resources more comparable in the endgame.

They wanted to label Johnson a *liberal* and have ideology and partisanship determine the race. We wanted values and empathy for the public to emerge as the question.

We wanted voters entering the voting booth asking who is most like them, who understands them, who is really on their side.

Finkelstein's M.O.

When you start your campaign is not always up to you. Arthur Finkelstein, Pressler's strategy and message guru, true to his M.O. in other races, launched early. Pressler and Finkelstein attacked earlier than we wanted, earlier than we anticipated, earlier than any candidate in any other race in

The Horses, Handlers, Wagers, and Payoffs

| | Tim Johnson (D) | Larry Pressler (R) |
|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Media | Struble, Oppel, Donovan | Arthur Finkelstein |
| Pollster | The Mellman Group | Arthur Finkelstein |
| Estimated spending | \$2.9 million | \$4.4 million |
| Votes | 166,511 (51.3 percent) | 157,912 (48.7 percent) |

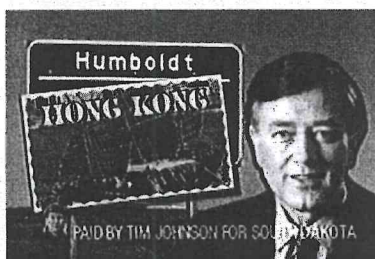
America. They attacked in July of 1995, a full sixteen months before the election.

Their attack started with trumped-up charges that we were behind "independent expenditure" ads being run in the state that were criticizing Pressler about cutting nursing home care. They followed that quickly with the first of more than forty separate negative ads calling Tim Johnson a liberal. They attacked Johnson for voting for the biggest tax increase ever, for opposing welfare reform, on school prayer, abortion . . . the list was endless.

Over the next year, Pressler and the National Republican Senatorial Committee ran more than 35,000 rating points of television time. That level is more than three times the number of ads typically run in the average competitive Senate campaign. Astonishingly, over two-thirds of Pressler's ads were negative, and all of them—every single negative ad after the first commercial—concluded with the refrain that Tim Johnson was a liberal. The ads were focused and tough; in fact, perhaps too tough for South Dakota. Focus groups were repulsed by the simplistic nature of Pressler's ads and what they saw as name-calling. Voters had a sense of who Tim Johnson was, they knew he was a Democrat, but instinctively they could not buy that he was a liberal. The word did not fit the person.

We worked the press and newspaper editors to exploit factual errors in Pressler's ads and to condemn his overly negative approach. We started to sell these media opinion leaders the basic elements of our message box that Larry had "changed," and our efforts bore results. More than a year out, editorials characterized our opponent's ads as "cheap shots" and "false." These editorials became the validators for our response ads.

Sporadically, we responded to Pressler's almost continuous attacks—undermining their credibility and seeding the idea that the old Larry Pressler we knew would not have stooped so low and been so dirty. We had no illusions about our strategy. We knew that thousands of negative rating points run against Johnson would have an effect. Our best hope was to keep the race even until Labor Day, when we could mount a continuous two-track positive and negative campaign.



Thirty-Second TV Spot

Tim Johnson for Senate

"Frequent Flyer"

Produced by: Struble, Oppel, Donovan

VIDEO: Travel postcards from around the world with Pressler photo.

ANNOUNCER: Paris, London, Hong Kong . . . Larry Pressler has traveled the world at our expense. When you add up Larry's taxpayer paid junkets, he's spent more than a year overseas . . . free trips to sixty-five foreign countries . . . including the Riviera and Rio. Pressler was named junketeer-of-the-year . . . and one of the Senate's most frequent flyers . . . It's a long way from Humboldt to Hong Kong . . . and it makes you wonder . . . Is Larry Pressler really on our side?

In reality, we started TV ads in June of 1996. *We went positive.* We talked about values and issues that put Johnson squarely on the side of average families. *We targeted women.* We constructed simple, direct, sentimental ads that spoke of pocketbook issues and reinforced our candidate's own family values. We made positive ads on traditional subjects like education, Medicare, farm policy and welfare reform. We also produced value-laden ads with special appeal to women on subjects like teenage pregnancy, domestic abuse, and gambling on the Internet. Often we used female voice-overs. We pictured Johnson listening, not just talking. Our scripts consciously employed conciliatory language and touted constructive solutions

that studies show appeal to female voters. We did this not to dupe voters but rather to communicate accurately who our candidate really was and to attract our natural constituencies.

A TV spot titled "Solid" was typical of this style. While the ad could be viewed as a laundry list of positives, in reality it was a vehicle for saying that Tim Johnson is not like most Washington politicians, he is like you. Coincidentally, this ad ran more than any other one we produced. "Solid" saw almost 2,000 rating points during September and early October. It was the positive counter-position from which we opened attacks on Pressler's character. It also served as a reminder that this race was not about ideology.

Consciously, we saved our bullets for the end. The campaign spent thousands of hours researching Pressler's record and his foreign travel and use of perks and campaign funds. We spent months educating various members of the press on Pressler's transgressions. We documented every vote he missed to earn a speaking fee. We matched his votes with special interest checks. We identified almost half a million dollars in unexplained personal expenses reimbursed by his campaign. We found thousands of dollars spent on first-class airfare, luxury hotel suites, limos, opera tickets, and a copy of the social registry. We could even prove that Pressler spent more time in foreign countries than he did in South Dakota one year, and that he had cumulatively spent more than a year overseas at taxpayer expense since he was in the Senate. It was quite a compelling case.

The press ate it up. Our campaign systematically doled out the information piece by piece to reporters in D.C. and South Dakota. The result was a series of damaging articles that accurately depicted a senator who had let his position go to his head and who used his office for personal benefit. We used the headlines generated as validators for our ads. They added credibility, making our commercials seem fair and believable.

The most provocative of these ads was a script called "Frequent Flyer" (see TV spot, facing page). It combined headlines of Pressler's junkets with postcards from exotic destinations and footage of a tropical beach. It was designed to cut through the clutter using these cartoonish images coupled with a sound track that flipped from jazz to calypso music to a Chinese gong at the end. The ad confronted voters with the reality that Larry Pressler had changed and questioned whether he was really on their side.

Within days of our earned and paid media assaults, tracking polls conducted by our pollster, the Mellman Group, showed a meteoric rise in Pressler's negatives on abuse of office and a deterioration of empathy traits like "cares about people like me." Consequently, we opened up a 5 to 10 percent lead in early October.

In fairness, it must be pointed out that Pressler also succeeded in driving up a perception that Johnson was "too liberal." Over the course of the cam-

paign, we endured a steady but less substantial erosion on this trait. Fortunately, it affected the view of Republicans more than Independents or Democrats. Nevertheless, the race closed up at the end with Pressler's partisan and ideological advantages holding back a Johnson blowout.

The race was the longest and most expensive in South Dakota history. It was by far the most negative the state has ever seen. Ultimately, we overcame our liabilities in ideology, party, and money because our message was more believable and more compelling.

The opposition made a fundamental mistake: It is not enough to simply maintain someone is a liberal. Pressler, or rather adviser Finkelstein, did not connect the dots and make the anti-liberal argument relevant to voters. Besides, the pejorative use of the label "liberal" was offensive to many South Dakotans and did not fit the style and substance of Tim Johnson.

We chose to run on a message voters could understand and buy. Tim was like them and Larry had "gone Washington." After all, it is very easy for the public to believe twenty-two years in Washington would change anyone.

We spent our resources smarter, had a simple, believable, meaningful message and we executed it better. The victory was sweet, the margin slim, and the result was the only U.S. Senate challenger to win in 1996.

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The Senator from Central Casting

How Fred Thompson Turned Tennessee Politics Upside Down in 1994

FRED THOMPSON (R) VS. JIM COOPER (D) IN AN
OPEN SEAT RACE

David Beiler

The status quo of Tennessee politics, dominated by Democrats for so long, exploded in 1994, as Republicans captured the top three slots by convincing margins. Democrats had held every statewide office for the past eight years; in 1994, they barely won one—a seat on the Public Service Commission. Jim Sasser, the man expected to become Democratic Leader of the next U.S. Senate, was beaten by 14 points—by a political unknown.

Much of the sudden and dramatic shift in GOP fortunes in the land of Andrew Jackson could be traced to the electorate's enthusiastic reaction to Senate candidate Fred Thompson, a straight talking attorney and actor who had succeeded in defining Tennessee's political agenda. Thompson's star quality—already evident in films such as *Hunt for Red October* and *In the Line of Fire*—soon took center stage in Washington, where he was chosen to deliver the GOP response to President Clinton's mid-term address to the nation in December.

The Prince and the GOp

Not so long ago, the drawling Thompson was anything but the center of adulation. As late as August—when a treasureless salesman held him to little more than three-fifths of the vote in the Republican primary—Thompson looked like a longshot in the race to complete the last two years of Al Gore's Senate term. Opponent Jim Cooper had the strongest credentials of any non-incumbent candidate in the country. A Rhodes Scholar son of a former

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