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POLITICAL RESEARCH

From Statistics To Strategy

By Michael Cohen, Cohen Research Group

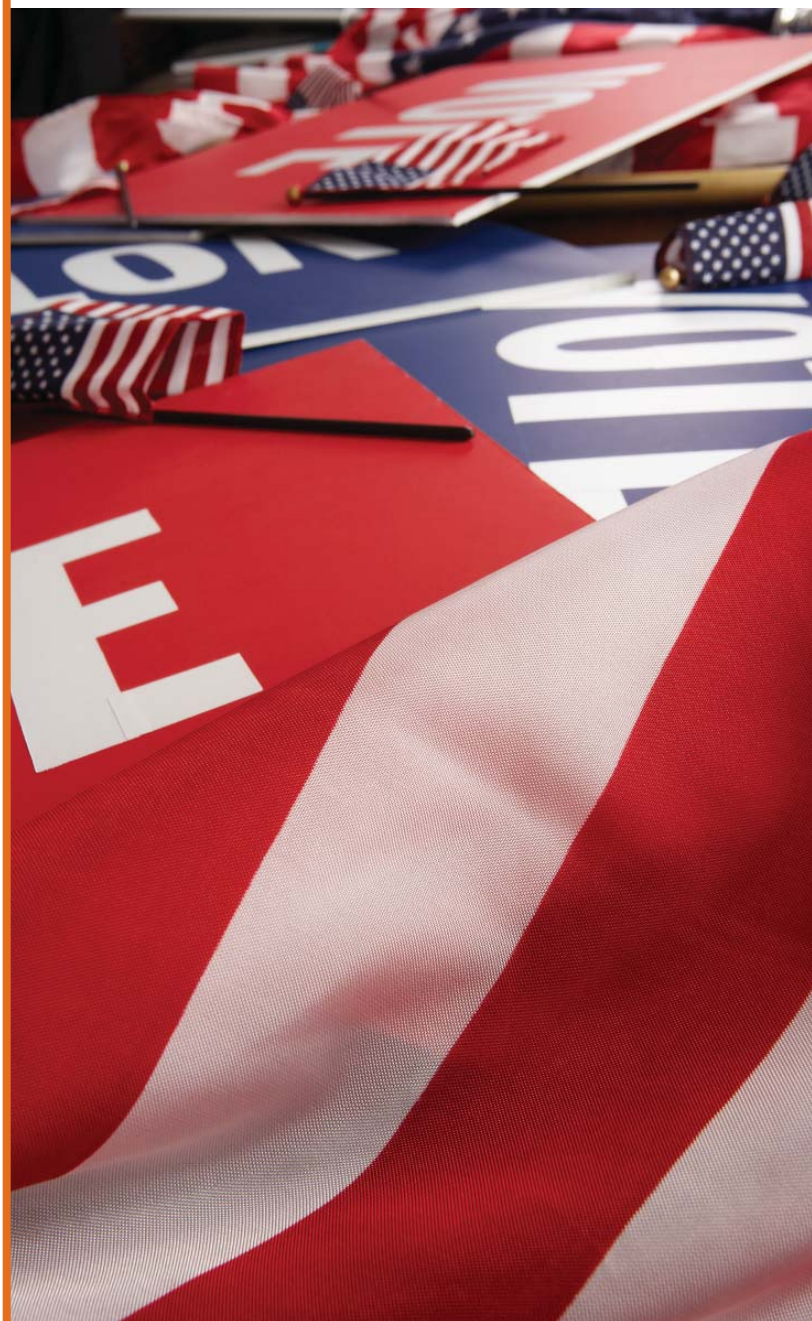
Now that Michael Phelps has finished dominating the Olympics, it's time to refocus our attention on the other quadrennial competition that is the United States presidential election. Both the Olympics and presidential campaigns are based on tracking – who is winning and losing? They are also based on outcomes – who won and lost? But those numbers show us only the stats, not the strategy or reasons for the outcomes.

Getting from stats to strategy is the primary use of research. Most candidates will commission an initial poll to outline the race and locate their starting line. The initial stats such as strength of support for the incumbent, name identification of potential candidates, and which issues are most important to voters add up to the first important cut of the data.

Strength of support for the incumbent, if it is under 50%, can be the single most powerful reason for someone to enter a race or for a party to get behind a challenger campaign. For a variety of factors this cycle favors Democrats. However, 11-time incumbent Rep. Paul Kanjorski (D-11-PA) has a support for re-election stat below 50%, which drew an unusually qualified Republican opponent. At this point in the race the Mayor of Hazelton, Lou Barletta, is rated by The Cook Report as a “toss up” in a year where Democrats should have none.

Certain stats open opportunities for fund-raising and communications. About 100 days from Election Day, Democratic challenger Jim Martin has closed the head-to-head gap to six points, close to a statistical tie, with incumbent Republican Senator Saxby Chambliss in Georgia. The Martin campaign Web site is using this statistic along with the Chambliss's sub-50% support from likely voters to raise money and grow its support.

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Campaign Strategy From Statistics

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Getting from strategy to outcomes is the most challenging portion of any race. A strategy needs to be flexible enough to achieve the outcome. No one cares about Michael Phelps' strategy, only if it worked. The statistics we track in campaigns are not only who is winning but why. Has the incumbent's ratings moved? Have voter impressions of our candidate changed? Have the issues changed? We can make the right adjustments only if we know why.

This presidential campaign is instructive on how each has used their research about voter preferences to their greatest strategic advantage. John McCain's campaign has tracked the dissatisfaction with President George W. Bush, which rarely cracks 30% approval anymore, and has made the strategic decision to run against Bush despite McCain's 100% support for his policies in 2008 and 95% in 2007, according to Congressional Quarterly. One of McCain's television ads opens with the line, "Washington's broken. John McCain knows it." McCain also saw that Sen. Barack Obama's positive/negative ratings were so skewed toward the former that McCain is hitting Obama whenever and wherever he can. The McCain camp decided with its research that it could level the playing field with Obama by going negative.


On the other side, the Obama campaign focused their strategy early on one word: Change. It worked for Bill

Clinton in 1996 and the Obama campaign understood their candidate embodied the idea of change by his background and experience. Obama effectively used his speeches and communications to draw the contrast to his primary competitors and now is using it on McCain. However, Obama clearly understood the research, which showed voters' uneasiness about his lack of experience in Washington, and he picked a Senate-lifer in Joe Biden of Delaware to be his running mate.

Campaign strategy is only good if it gets you to the desired outcome. In politics, we encourage tracking so they can take advantages of, or react to shifts in the campaign. The outcome stat is who is going to win. Due to the changing nature of communications and campaigning, no candidate for president will allow attacks to go unanswered anymore. Instead of trying to figure out if an attack caused damage, we now focus tracking to see if the rebuttal is working with key voter groups. You see this in the "prebuttal" advertising McCain's campaign did immediately after Obama chose Biden with unflattering statements by the newly selected running mate.

Outcomes derived from stats can be difficult to defend in the face of conflicting information. The truth is that most people political candidates meet are very different from those who actually vote. Even people who answer the door when a candidate walks a precinct look at politics and vote differently. Tony Fabrizio tells a story of Bob Dole who was so detached from his own race for president that, when presented with data to the contrary, Dole said that it "felt" closer. There is something to be said about gut instincts but most of the time the stats are right.

The best way to handle defending the stats is being open to other information and to remember whom the client is. Simply telling a client that the data are real is not sufficient during a year where the experts bungled the call in New Hampshire and still cannot figure out why. The best strategy to defend the stats is to surround them with other reliable and local information. As in New Hampshire, the best source for how Obama closed on Clinton was the local news outlets, which had the best sense of whom might turn out to vote.

Finally, the best thing we can do with our stats is to recognize that we are dealing with real people. Our clients are people who are willing to take an extraordinary risk with their personal and professional lives to run for office. The voters we hope to earn are people with hopes, dreams and families. Our statistics are only as good as our respect for those who provide them willingly, the strategy we derive from them, and the outcomes we seek beyond the race. It's not enough just to sit atop the medal stand, but to be proud of the way we got there. 

Michael Cohen is the President and CEO of Cohen Research Group. He can be reached at mcohen@cohenresearchgroup.com.

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