

Campaign Managers Toolbox

Planning:
*Municipal
Campaigns*

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Hi, I'm **Caitlin**. Founder of **Huxley Strategies**.



I use data to help moderates win close races.

This guide is based on my **real-world experience** and the **practical strategies** I use with my clients every day. I hope you find it useful!

[Let's connect on LinkedIn](#), where I post more advice & tips to help you win your campaign.

Ancient Wisdom for Modern Campaigns *Lessons from Sun Tzu's Art of War*

Timeless strategy, modern campaigns. How Sun Tzu's wisdom can help you win elections today.

For over 2,000 years, Sun Tzu's Art of War has guided leaders in battle—and modern campaigns are no different.

In *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Campaigns*, I break down Sun Tzu's strategic principles and translate them into actionable tactics for political campaigns. From planning and messaging to timing and gaining the strategic advantage, these lessons remain as relevant today as they were centuries ago.



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Featured in **Campaigns & Elections** and on
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Introduction:

Running a municipal campaign is different.

Running a campaign for municipal office is a very different undertaking than running a campaign for state or federal office. Both require a strong understanding of the political landscape in your district, and the scope of your campaign changes what is possible and reasonable to do in each. While a larger campaign must focus on every town, each neighborhood, and all the people, in a local race, the focus is on your town, your neighborhood, and the people you already know. As a result, your campaign will be more intimate and personal, and it is much more likely that you can make a real difference in the lives of the people you aim to serve.

Municipal campaigns are typically smaller in scope and budget, with candidates campaigning on local issues and trying to connect with voters on a more personal level than is possible in a larger election. As a result, they tend to be less expensive. But be careful of thinking this makes them less complex than state or federal campaigns.

Another key difference to remember is the type of candidate typically involved in a local race. Municipal campaigns often attract candidates with deep roots in their community and a solid connection to local issues. In contrast, state and federal campaigns tend to attract more high-profile candidates with extensive experience in politics and government. This does not mean that a high-profile candidate cannot be successful but that your opponent is less likely to be one.

Perhaps the most notable difference between municipal and state/federal campaigns is the level of scrutiny and the public attention they receive. State and federal campaigns are subject to intense media scrutiny, with every move and misstep picked apart and analyzed by reporters and pundits. Not so with the smaller municipal elections. These campaigns are unlikely to receive much media attention, allowing you to more narrowly focus your message and connect with voters without the added pressure of intense scrutiny.

Running a campaign for municipal office can be challenging, requiring a deeper understanding of local issues and a stronger connection with the community.

Leaner, Faster, Stronger: *Smaller scope, bigger opportunities.*

Off-election and municipal campaigns are almost always smaller in scope and scale, focusing on a specific geographic area or issue rather than a large and diverse population, which allows candidates to tailor their messaging and approach to the specific needs of their constituents, resulting in a more personal and effective campaign.

Your campaign may seem like a smaller deal, with fewer voters and less media attention. But these campaigns actually offer a bigger opportunity for candidates. In a smaller pool of voters, it's easier to get noticed and make a lasting impression. With fewer people casting ballots, every vote counts that much more. With a smaller district, it is easier for your voter contact efforts to reach everyone. A candidate and a volunteer or two can often knock on every door in the district by themselves. A full team can make 3 or 4 passes through.

Second, they are faster in execution, with shorter timelines and less bureaucracy to navigate before candidates can get their names on the ballots and begin campaigning. This allows (and forces) candidates to move quickly. Because these elections are usually in the spring, and nothing happens in politics until at least after the new year, campaigns find themselves with only a few months to do everything that needs to be done.

This is a two-edged sword. While you will not have a long timeline to build your campaign organization, recruit volunteers, contact voters, and GOTV your supporters, nor will your opponents. If you begin planning while the November election is going on, kick off your campaign at the local party Christmas party, and organize a few volunteer training activities in early January, you can easily be ahead of the competition.

Third, these campaigns are stronger in impact, as they often deal with issues that are directly relevant and impactful to voters' daily lives. Whether it's improving local schools, reducing crime, or addressing environmental concerns, these campaigns have the ability to make a tangible difference in people's lives.

You'll also not be fighting with the top of the ticket for resources such as donations, volunteers, and the availability of good staffers. The combination of these three assets can quickly provide a small campaign with a full war chest, a robust team, and with some smart hiring, a strong campaign manager.

All politics is local:

Gaining broad support with a narrow focus.

It is often said that "all politics is local." This is because what matters most to voters is what is happening in their backyard. Therefore, to win, it is necessary to focus on the specific needs and concerns of the local community. This is particularly true in off-year and municipal campaigns, where the issues at stake are often much more closely tied to the voters' everyday lives. Conveniently, these issues are often the ones most effectively addressed at the local level rather than by national politicians or organizations.

Typically, in an election with a large district (like for state senate, congress, or governor), a campaign should list each of the major demographics in their district and their key issues. Then cross-referencing the lists with each other and with the policy positions they've taken, must carefully weave a plan to encompass as many as possible votes without upsetting any of the individual groups. By focusing on the local issues, candidates can build a diverse coalition of supporters united by their shared interests and common concerns.

However, in a smaller race, like those found on municipal and other off-year ballots, the number of groups you will need to consider is much smaller, and it is often much easier to find common ground between them. Instead of dealing with a sprawling and diverse array of interests, you can focus on a few key groups and craft a message that resonates with them. This is not to say that smaller races are easy. They still require careful planning, strategic thinking, and much hard work. But they do offer a unique opportunity to connect with voters in a more personal and meaningful way. And in today's increasingly divisive political climate, that can be a real advantage.

The nature of off-year and municipal campaigns means that the stakes are often much lower than in national or state-level elections. As a result, these races may not be as headline-grabbing as those in other campaigns. This can actually be a good thing, as it can create an environment where voters are more willing to engage with you and your campaign. Further, without the distractions of the higher-tier offices being on the ballot, voters are more likely to take the time to listen to what candidates have to say and to ask questions about the policies and positions that matter most to them. Something that plagues candidates for State Representative and Senate.

Limited Time to Campaign: *It's a sprint, not a marathon.*

In the short timeframe of a municipal campaign, there is little time for debate and discussion. Candidates must make their case quickly and effectively, and voters must make up their minds just as quickly. There is no time for long, drawn-out primary campaigns or months of endless polling. In a municipal campaign, everything happens fast.

The speed of a municipal campaign creates a sense of urgency and excitement. It can make the electoral process feel more immediate and relevant, and it can make candidates feel as if time is running out and the only way to survive is to act fast. But, unfortunately, this can lead to hasty decisions. The key is to strike a balance between speed and deliberation. You will have to be nimble and responsive to any change in the election, but you must also take the time to think things through to weigh the pros and cons of your choices. This is why a carefully crafted campaign plan is essential.

For an example of a field plan in a traditional campaign, [see this free resource I've made available](#). You will have to adapt it for your shorter timeline, and smaller voter pool.

"Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays" - This quote from the Art of War by Sun Tzu reminds us that although a longer timeline for our campaign may offer us more time to prepare and reach out to voters, a lengthy campaign can be extremely costly. Every election, we hear about some congressional or gubernatorial race which is now the most expensive ever! We cannot continue pushing this mark forever, and in a shorter race, you're less likely to be required to try.

Remember that in this, as in most other things on a campaign, what applies to you also applies to your opponents. If your opponents don't do the same, you can seize the advantage over them. If they attack you, you indeed have less time to respond, but the reverse is true here as well. Time your "October Surprise" right, and you can leave them with no recourse.

If you can plan well, act with certainty when the time comes, and spend your money efficiently, you can minimize the downsides of running in such a short timeline.

Making an Impact:

In the community, in your future.

Municipal campaigns only take place locally; thus, candidates can build closer connections with their constituents. You can attend a more significant percentage of the local community events, listen to residents' concerns, and develop a deeper understanding of the issues most important to voters. Spending time on these activities before you launch your campaign can help you tailor your campaigns and issue positions to those specific to the community.

These issues are often the most overlooked but can also be some of the easiest to implement. If, for example, you're planning on running for city council or mayor of a small town, you can address some minute but critical issues, such as improving local a school or expanding public transportation. For example, adding a new bus route to service the new senior center may seem insignificant, but it can significantly impact the community.

If you could snap your fingers and fix all the little issues plaguing your neighborhood, wouldn't you do so? Getting the potholes fixed as a citizen might be a bureaucratic nightmare, but it'd be significantly more manageable with a little local power. Think about why you initially decided to run for office and who might have similar goals. Who else might have similar problems that you can address? If you addressed these issues, what else might be solved simultaneously? A strong campaign can shine a light on issues many people don't realize they have, even if you don't win.

Beyond the obvious impact on the community, there is also a major impact on your future as a candidate and your political career. Because of that close connection to the community, easier access to active voters, and the ability to address issues you might actually get to change, you can rapidly build a strong base of supporters from the ground up. Even if it is not ultimately successful, a city council run might set you up for success in subsequent years running for State Representative or Congress. Face-to-face interactions and building a personal connection with voters can have a major impact on your chances of influencing voters.

Think about what you want for your community and your future in politics. Set goals that are attainable in the small scope of your campaign.

Non-partisan campaigning: *Not as alone as you think.*

A campaign for a non-partisan candidate is quite different than for a member of the major political parties. If you're a candidate for a non-partisan race, you will not necessarily have the backing of your party in the same way, but this doesn't mean you will have to rely only on your own resources to win. Political parties typically have established donors and fundraising networks, while non-partisan candidates must build their own. But if you've been active in your local party for a while before you run (which you should have been), then you've probably already made some meaningful connections. If these are key figures within the party, they can likely help you make new connections outside your circle of influence but inside theirs.

Additionally, the fact is people will know your party. Past voter behavior is public record. If your state is one where you must register as affiliated with a party or if you've participated in a primary election, the word will get out. Occasionally, I work with candidates who think they can hide their affiliation, e.g., a Republican running as a Non-Partisan, in an area that is usually inhospitable to Republicans. This is not likely to work out well. Your opponents will look you up, and if it serves their purposes to do so, they'll make sure people know the facts.

So when approaching new volunteers, donors, or supporters, if you're asked, "Are you a Republican or a Democrat?" (and you will be asked!) don't shy away from the truth. If they slam the door on you, then at least you've IDed that voter. If they keep talking to you, then your answer must have been the right one.

Another significant difference in a campaign for a non-partisan candidate is the lack of a straightforward political platform. Non-partisan candidates do not necessarily have an established party platform to lean on and must create their own positions on issues. This can be both a strength and a weakness, as non-partisan candidates have the freedom to craft their own message but may also struggle to define their stance on some of the big questions clearly. And just like party affiliation, you'll get asked those questions. If you're running for dog catcher, but someone asks about your stance on abortion, you'd better answer it. You can try to explain that you're going to be in no position to affect that issue, but just like above, they're going to demand an answer. Like above, if they slam the door or keep talking to you, you'll know whether you've earned their support.

Experimentation:

For experienced candidates and staff only.

A municipal political campaign can experiment in ways not available to federal or state candidates. First and foremost, These races are typically much smaller in scale and scope, so they have more flexibility and freedom to try out different strategies and tactics, as they do not have to worry about the same level of scrutiny or media attention.

One way municipal candidates can experiment is by using social media and other digital platforms to reach and engage with voters in new ways. While major campaigns often have large budgets and professional teams handling their social media, municipal campaigns will have to rely on volunteer support and smaller budgets, and thus on their creativity to get noticed. For example, you might try out different types of content, such as videos, memes, or infographics, to see what resonates best with your audience.

In everything you do, consider who your audience is, what messages they want to hear, and how they want to be contacted. While a large campaign must go for a shotgun approach, with a smaller target audience, you can be more surgical in your approach. You can use your limited resources most efficiently by concentrating all your efforts on the one method that your target voters prefer and ignoring all others.

But beware of this sort of experimentation. Spending all your time on Facebook, at the door, or sending texts, can be amazingly impactful if you are right about who your voters are, but if you guess wrong, you'll miss out on nearly every contact you could be making. Without the experience of several campaigns, you're more likely to be wrong, and you'll waste all your time and your whole budget. Further, if you're not experienced in that method of campaigning, you can potentially damage your campaign. E.g., if you're not well-versed in social media marketing tactics but decide to focus your campaign on TikTok, you are likely to make mistakes and fail to make any real connections at all.

Suppose you are an experienced campaigner and have solid staff on your campaign. In that case, testing out different campaign tactics and fine-tuning your messaging strategy can help you win easily and learn valuable lessons that you can apply to future campaigns. Just beware of going too far afield of traditional tactics unless you know what you're doing and you're sure you're on the right track.

How **Huxley Strategies** helps campaigns win:

“Caitlin is a bona fide expert in campaign data strategy. Her ability to distill complex information into actionable insights for campaigns of all sizes is unmatched.”

- Mike Yelovich, Polling Director



“Caitlin completely illuminated my data blind spot where I was missing key insights on voters. Her expertise was greatly appreciated and she was able to give me digestible information when needed.”

- Travis Sterling, Director of P2P Fundraising



Contact Me:

Winning close races starts with the right data. **Let's talk.**

With **15 years of experience** in campaign strategy and data analysis, I help moderate candidates win close elections with **data-driven strategy, voter modeling, and targeted outreach.** In modern elections, voters are bombarded with ads, mailers, and other outreach.

Without the right data, you risk your message getting lost in the noise.

[Book a Strategy Session.](#)

