

Why Campaigning on Big Issues Could Be a Mistake



When I hear a news analyst on television say that the Republican presidential candidates are doing the right thing by focusing their early campaign rhetoric on the economy, jobs, and foreign policy, I tend to cringe.

It's not because I don't think those issues are important. On the contrary...I think they're *extremely* important. And if you look at the national polls, most Americans say the same. They cite them as their top concerns.

Why am I squeamish, then?

Conventional wisdom says I shouldn't be. Conventional wisdom says that if you listen to the American people, and shape your campaign narratives around the big-ticket issues they say are most important to them, you're doing what's smart.

The problem is that I just don't think that's true anymore. I think there is now such a wide gap between what Americans say is important, and what they actually *view* as important, that the polls can no longer be relied upon by political campaigns hoping to be successful.

If you take a look at Hillary Clinton's campaign memes right now, you'll find these issues listed as her top priorities:

- Income inequality
- Immigration reform
- Marriage equality

- Equal pay
- Criminal justice reform
- Women's rights

Nothing about the economy, nothing about jobs, and nothing about foreign policy.

Is she delusional? Well, there's a case that can be made for that, but her campaign certainly isn't delusional. They know *exactly* what they're doing. They're not just appealing to the base (although that's certainly part of it). They're also taking early *ownership* of ethnicity-based social wedge-issues that they can later use to drive a stake right through the heart of whoever ends up winning the Republican primary in 2016.

Why will these things serve as such effective tools in a general election? It's because conservatives still falsely believe that most Americans will look above the fray, see the big picture, and choose solutions over grievance-pandering. That philosophy may hold true in mid-term elections (where the people paying the closest attention are the ones who are voting), but it doesn't apply so much to presidential elections—not these days.

These days, many people (perhaps most) don't identify successes with how they were created, nor do they associate failures with what caused them. The presidency is no longer measured by job performance. It's really not even viewed as an actual job, but rather a symbol or a brand. Much of it is about likeability. Some of it is about optics (like the *first black president* or the *first female president*). More generally, Americans now want a president who *stands for them*, as in someone who represents an idea.

Whether or not that president can actually solve problems... Well, that's merely an afterthought.

Right now, Hillary Clinton is branding herself as the

candidate who *stands* for women, minorities, and anyone who feels as though they've been oppressed by society because of their ethnicity. The goal is to lock up key demographics by appealing to instincts and emotions. Does she have any solutions for them? No... not real ones. But again, solutions don't matter. As long as she's "standing for" their grievances, that's enough for a lot of people—many of whom are currently telling pollsters that the economy, jobs, and foreign policy are their biggest concerns.

Does this mean that the Republicans shouldn't be talking about major issues? Of course not, but it does mean that they need to diversify their messaging and vow not to let Hillary Clinton take ownership of a title she hasn't earned. The reality is that she has done nothing to advance the lives of the very people she claims to be a "champion" of. This leaves an opening.



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Republican candidates should directly address the same grievances that Hillary is (as contrived as some of them are) without sounding dismissive or patronizing. That doesn't mean

they have to lend credence to false narratives and perceptions, but they do have to understand where those perceptions are coming from, and navigate them effectively. They also need to go out to communities that have traditionally not been receptive to them, and speak to people's lower-level concerns. Rand Paul has done this. The others should follow.

Additionally, they need to call out Hillary Clinton's hypocrisy on these issues at every opportunity. When she talks about equal pay, they need to remind voters of the gender wage-gap among those who work for her. If she tries to play the race card, they need to remind voters that she was the originator of the Birther conspiracy. For every wedge issue she tries to brand herself as a hero on, the Republicans need to frame her as the heel, using the same standards put forth by her party and the media.

Republicans need to realize that the winning philosophy is no longer "It's the economy, stupid," but rather "It's the wedge-issue, stupid." If they fail to understand that, they'll likely lose the White House once again.