



Florida Opinion Research

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TO: Interested Parties

FR: Paul Fallon

RE: Post-Election Survey Case Study of Levy with Organized Opposition

After most major elections, I conduct a post-election voter survey in a place that had some unique set of circumstances that I believe will provide learning opportunities for other local governments, school districts and organizations that have an interest in public funding that requires voter approval. The Upper Arlington City School District in central Ohio, had a rather contentious levy request on the ballot that encountered organized -- nay, well organized -- opposition. Voters rejected the levy by a modest margin, 45% to 55%. Although it is becoming more common for citizen groups to organize in opposition to this, and many other types of ballot issues and referenda, there is still quite a bit to be learned, and heeded, from such situations.

OPINION ENVIRONMENT:

Impressively, most voters said that they knew enough about the levy in order to make informed decisions (76%), and the modest difference for this measure between those who were for and against the levy was not statistically-significant. This suggests that the topic was captivating enough for voters to follow and inform themselves about, despite the din of advertising for other races. Moreover, it is reasonable to infer from this that voters in Upper Arlington have a sincere interest in their schools, regardless of whether they have children enrolled in them.

WHAT WENT RIGHT:

Since the request was rejected by voters because it failed to garner support among a majority of them, it might be logical to assume that the campaign also failed. However, the survey data sheds light on some organizational accomplishments that are worth noting. Parents of district students robustly supported the levy, with 62% voting for it, which is an essential, although not solely sufficient conduction for passage. Typically, levies of any type that get less than 62% support from their primary constituencies are soundly rejected by the rest of the voters. In fact, many successful campaigns conduct bi-furcated outreach to galvanize their core constituencies with narrow-cast communication of unique appeals that are not effective with the general public. The levy also received support from 63% of Democrat voters in the community, which is notable because they are growing in size and influence within the formerly-staunch Republican bastion of Upper Arlington. Anecdotally, as I was driving through the community, I noticed numerous yard signs promoting the



levy, which is a telltale sign of a well-organized and energetic campaign effort. Although the levy was defeated, the campaign can claim some success by creating propitious conditions for victory, which is an essential element that often eludes other campaigns and thwarts success of levy requests that are more viable than this one may have been.

WHAT WENT WRONG:

While it is difficult to discern whether the community was riven by the ardor of the two competing campaigns, or the size and monetary implications of the levy request itself, there was a high degree of polarization that contributed to the demise of the ballot issue. The levy was opposed by substantial majorities of unaffiliated/independent voters (57%) and Republicans (65%). Although most parents of District students supported the levy, most voters without children in District schools, or non-parents, opposed it, with only 38% voting for it. Since non-parents represented the majority of voters in the community, this put the levy campaign at a numerical disadvantage that it could not overcome. Although it might be natural to conclude that the dismal support among non-parents was due to resistance to higher taxes, the most common reason that non-parents said they voted against it was because they did not think the District needed the money or could meet its needs by changing budgetary priorities, which was cited by 32% of all voters who voted against the levy. Interestingly, this sentiment was a prevalent one, because most voters (55%) said that they believed that there was already enough money being spent on public education in the community. Curiously, it was such a widely held notion that even most parents of District students shared it (60%), despite the fact that most of them voted for it.

One of the biggest differences is that 47% of voters who voted for the levy said that the defeat of it would hurt the quality of education a lot or somewhat, compared to just 6% of voters who voted against it. This suggests that, despite the presence of organized opposition, the levy may have been defeated by a more benign cause:

complacency. Simply put, it is evident that voters thought they could vote against the levy with clear consciences, because they did not seem to think it would materially affect education.

In retrospect, the prospect of possible class size increases that might result from the defeat of the levy made some voters second-guess themselves. Among those who voted against the levy, 23% said that they thought possible class size increases would hurt the quality of education a lot or somewhat. Considering that a net difference of just about 5% stood between victory and defeat of the levy, this information might have changed the outcome.

IMPACT OF THE ORGANIZED OPPOSITION:

Overall, 25% of voters said that the information from the opposition group was very or somewhat convincing, but this reached 46% among those who said they voted against the levy. Rather than belittling the school system and chiding it for any perceived or purported shortcomings -- which might be incompatible with the framework of existing beliefs in such a highly-heralded school system -- the opposition campaign adroitly suggested that it was “okay to vote against the levy,” and seemed to imply that doing so was acceptable, regardless of how voters felt about the schools. In fact, this message was so widely conveyed, and for a few, so resonant, that some of the voters who said they voted against the levy directly alluded to it as a reason for their decisions, and quoted

“Usually I vote for the school levies, but as I read the details on this, it seemed like some of the stuff that they wanted didn't seem important.”

**Quote from
Against Voter**

the opposition mantra nearly verbatim. While it is natural to question and debate the true impact that organized opposition could have on a levy that asks voters to raise their taxes during a period of prolonged economic malaise, the data indicates that the deft way in which it strove to minimize misgivings about voting against the levy may also have contributed to its defeat.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED:

Although it is not possible for campaigns to control all the various factors that exist in the opinion environment, such as the emergence of organized opposition, winning campaigns are ones that make pragmatic decisions about what they can and cannot control, so they can focus energy on the former, without dithering about the latter. Time spent making sure that voters understand the implications of what the decision means to the community -- and can do in so in practical terms -- will be better spent than engaging in debates with opponents. Outreach needs to be carefully crafted to deliver the right information to the proper audiences. A one-size-fits-all approach to message development and delivery does not work when you are balancing competing interests, such as personal financial considerations and the preservation of the educational product. Winning campaigns are ones that are nimble enough to direct different, yet complementing messages to divergent audiences, to ensure that both understand the tangible aspects of the decision that is being made, such as larger class sizes. There is a saying in the field of electoral politics that “every campaign is about something”, and a corollary to it: if the campaign is about money, voters will vote to keep theirs!

Please note that this survey was not funded or commissioned by any organization or committee, nor was Florida Opinion Research involved in either of the campaigns, in any capacity. The survey was conducted because I believe that it explores topical matters that may be of interest to people with whom I professionally associate. If you have any questions about this data or would like to discuss it, please feel free to call me at 813-283-2665.

This information is based on survey research that was conducted through telephone interviews of 303 randomly-selected registered voters in the Upper Arlington City School District, Ohio with valid residential or cellular telephone numbers who voted in the 2012 general election. The interviews were performed during the period of November 12, 2012 to November 13, 2012. The overall estimated margin of sampling error is +/- 5.62%, based on a confidence level of 95%, although it varies for each individual question. This means that if this survey was repeated, 95 times out of 100 the results would be within plus or minus 5.62% of those provided herein. In order to account for under- and over-sampling that normally occurs as a result of the random selection process, and ensure that all major voting sub-groups are represented in proportion to their actual percentages of the electorate, adjustments were made to proportionately weight the survey data toward the actual electoral outcome as well as demographic and electoral characteristics of the district.

“I read all articles in the Upper Arlington news, and was swayed by a letter to the editor by a teacher who said it was ‘okay to vote against it.’”

**Quote from
Against Voter**

About Paul Fallon...



Paul Fallon is a public opinion researcher, political pollster and advisor for levy committees, local government agencies, school districts, interest groups and trade associations. He specializes in land-use policy research, education and transit, as well public funding ballot issues and referendums. He has worked on issues and campaigns in more than 35 different states throughout the country, and has conducted opinion research and citizen satisfaction studies for transit services, school districts and government agencies of all sizes, from Florida to California.