



O'BRIEN • GARRETT

# MEMO

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## Navigating An Extraordinary Election Year

Obviously — thanks to Donald Trump — this is no ordinary election.

That makes it harder to predict if and how donors will adjust their giving behavior in the months ahead. But one thing is for sure: As Trump swings back and forth from looking like a threat to looking like a clown, **progressive donors will keep shifting from disgusted bemusement over the Trump phenomenon to “he’s one step away from the White House” alarm.**

So, how do we stay in contact with donors’ mindset and emotional state? And what can we do to protect our fundraising programs as we move through a volatile second half of 2016?

### From Now To Election Day

**Pre-Election Strategy for Charities:** Until we get to the post-election period, advocacy groups are going to feel the impact of the elections far more than charitable ones. Historically, we just haven’t seen elections influence charitable giving all that much. So for now, all they need to do is take a few common sense precautions:

- **Focus on your strongest “can’t wait” work.** We always want to put undeniably important projects in front of donors. But, that’s even more critical right now. This isn’t the time for “soft” appeals on topics donors can put into a “this can wait for another day” bucket.
- **Watch your timing.** Especially online, where so much political giving is now centered, it’s important to keep an eye on timing. Don’t run a big online campaign right into the weeks of the conventions or the avalanche of emails that come at month-end FEC deadlines.
- **Watch your tone.** Trump v. Hillary is going to be a dispiriting affair in terms of the quality of civic discourse. The more you can run counter to that with messages grounded in compassion, moral clarity and common sense, the better you will do.

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**Pre-Election Strategy for Advocacy Groups:** Here's the problem: Whatever issue you work on, sooner or later, donors reach the point where they believe winning the election is the best way to advance or protect that cause. The closer you get to Election Day, the stronger that dynamic gets.

We've seen different election year influences for progressive groups over the years. In some cycles, either positive energy (Obama in 2008) or negative energy (Bush in 2004) have tended to lift all boats.

But, this doesn't feel like that kind of election. **It's not shaping up like a "good vs evil" election as much as an "okay v. evil" battle** that people will be happy to survive as opposed to excited to engage in. If that spirit holds, advocacy groups will have to provide their own energy in the months with a few key goals:

- **First and foremost, remain flexible.** We've already seen several shifts in the tone and temper of this election cycle and there are probably more to come. So, it's important to remain nimble in our ability to react to those shifts. Planning your calendar through November and sticking with it may not be in the cards.
- **Stay confident in your work and mission.** If you're worried about whether the work you are putting in front of donors holds up against the election climate, don't let it show. Organizations that are unsure of the importance of their own work can't convince donors of that importance. Donors will smell your fears.
- **Get all in or all out on the elections.** Groups that have a legitimate electoral role should play that card all the way, while recognizing that the closer the Election gets, the more candidate focused donors become. But, don't fake it. If you're not naming candidates you support or oppose, stay out of the game.
- **If you're moving away, move far away.** If electoral work isn't part of your mission, emphasize work that is as far removed from the elections as possible. Find issues and projects where a donor would say "This is really important and who wins the election won't change things much on this one."

## Post-Election Strategy

An unfortunate reality of the calendar is that, when the elections are over, we are smack in the middle of year-end fundraising. We and our donors won't have any respite to deal with the emotional outcome of the elections.

**Donors tend to reset their thinking and priorities after a presidential election.** And, because this is such a high stakes one and a Trump presidency would be such a remarkable departure, all of us — charities and advocacy groups alike — are going to see our year-end fundraising shaped by the election's outcome.

Every smart fundraising program will invest heavily in the weeks and months ahead in developing alternative scenarios (and financial expectations) for year-end giving. We will return to this topic in upcoming white papers, but here are a few opening guidelines:

#### **For charitable organizations:**

- **Offer donors relief with uplifting messages:** Whatever the outcome and whichever side they are on, your donors are going to have come through a long, dispiriting slog of an election. They will be thirsty for work and messages that are built around tangible, non-controversial opportunities to do some good in the world.
- **Recognize that a Trump victory could prove distracting to the progressive portion of your donor file.** While donors on either side of the ideological divide will be disappointed if they lose, the reaction of progressive donors to a Trump victory is likely to be especially intense. There may not be much to do about this, but it's not unreasonable to expect your charity falling lower on people's radar as they respond vigorously to political appeals.

#### **For advocacy groups:**

- **Adjust your year-end schedule to take election results into account.** Election day comes at a point when most of us have usually put our November year-end appeal to bed. Think twice about that timing this year. And develop clear Trump Wins/Hillary Wins scenarios — in advance and in detail.
- **If Hillary Wins, worry about donor energy.** Donor reaction to a Hillary win might be less about excitement and more about a big sigh of relief that the country dodged the Trump bullet. If that's the case, we'll have to work hard to advance arguments of vigorous year-end giving. More on this in the weeks ahead.
- **If Trump Wins... you know what to do.** No, not move to Canada. Experience tells us that progressives react to bitter defeats with an initial burst of "fighting spirit" giving. So write your appeals with that same energy and determination. The real problem will come in early 2017 when reality sets in and that first wave of energy dissipates.

We hope you find these thoughts and ideas helpful. And, as promised, we'll be back with more as we move through this extraordinary election year together.