Tip Sheet for Presidential Campaigns: How to Interact with Single-Issue Advocates, with AIDS as a Recent Example

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For campaign staffers everywhere...

1) If you think there's not much downside in pissing off the single-issue advocates, and it's not really an issue your campaign wants to focus on, then ignore them, or try a tactful brush-off. You could try to string them along, but that usually makes things worse, especially if the advocates are well organized and determined.

2) If you think there's a downside to ignoring the advocates, then attempt to engage them in a way where both sides benefit. After Clinton's AIDS gaffe, her campaign faced an obvious downside if they ignored us. The Sanders campaign could have continued to soft-pedal the issue (filling out questionnaires, etc.), but Sanders criticized the gaffe on CNN the next morning and came out with an HIV/AIDS plan on his website later that day. Some downside was thus created -- ignoring the advocates would open them up to charges of opportunism.

3) If your candidate cares about the issue, then engage the advocates in a way where both sides benefit. I'm convinced that both Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton care about HIV/AIDS, and both would hope to make progress against the domestic and international epidemics while president.

4) In our AIDS example, both #2 and #3 above were in play, which is probably why we were one of the few single-issue advocates to get meetings with both candidates during their incredibly busy primary schedules.

5) Don't make promises you can't keep. Both campaigns led us to believe our meetings with the candidates would happen before the NY primary. As that date approached, both campaigns were threatened with demos at their headquarters. The Clinton campaign was threatened with possible heckling of the candidate (I sent their LGBT liaison a text saying "FYI, the coalition is actively discussing ways to up the pressure before the primary, including paying homage to Bob Rafsky (RIP) - Google 'Bob Rafsky Bill Clinton'"). To avoid the demos, both campaigns issued public statements the Friday before the NY primary offering firm commitments to meet the candidates (Sanders offering "first week of May"; Clinton offering May 13th in NYC).

6) Expect to pay a price when you break a promise. The Clinton campaign started active negotiations on the planning of their meeting (which was eventually moved up a day to May 12th). The Sanders campaign gave us 4 days notice for a meeting lasting only 30-minutes in Indianapolis, then canceled it

less than 48 hours before it was set to start, leaving some in our group of 20 reps stuck with nonrefundable airline tickets. They inexplicably stopped answering emails. We gave them 5 days notice on a press release and social media campaign titled “Broken Promise,” but they obviously decided to take the hit, and continued to ignore our daily emails. The campaign was launched, and it worked. Within a few hours of our meeting with Clinton, the Sanders campaign finally emailed us and promised a new meeting date -- May 25th, in CA.

7) When you finally meet, you obviously want to leave with some positive spin for your candidate, but in a way that does not conflict with the advocates’ agenda. Fortunately, with our AIDS example, this isn’t hard to do. There was considerable overlap in our goals and the candidates’ HIV/AIDS plans. Clinton’s team put out an innocuous press release with standard Obamaesque AIDS rhetoric. We also left with a firm commitment for an additional meeting with her senior policy staff to flesh out our harder asks.

And here’s where the Sanders team made their second blunder. Instead of aligning their spin with the huge overlap of our agenda (and with what was actually discussed at the meeting), they used the meeting to highlight their endorsement of a California initiative they knew we had concerns about, with no reference to our concerns (“Sanders Backs California Ballot Initiative to Rein in Drug Prices at Meeting with HIV/AIDS Advocates” http://bit.ly/1XJM7nD). Sanders never raised his endorsement during his opening remarks or the remainder of the meeting. We raised it near the end of the meeting, only to point out that the CA groups in our coalition had been unsuccessful in their attempts to reach the campaign to discuss their concerns. Almost immediately, we got panicked calls from our CA partners thinking we had endorsed the initiative instead of raising their concerns. The ballot initiative was written and launched by Michael Weinstein at the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, and once he knew we wouldn’t go along with his spin on the meeting, he posted libelous attacks against “opponents” of the initiative.

Why didn’t the Sanders press release say “HIV/AIDS Advocates Thank Sanders for his Lifelong Support of Single-Payer Universal Healthcare”? We sent them our opening statement in advance that included this endorsement of his healthcare plank. Wouldn’t that have helped him in the CA primary? Why would they highlight something we disagreed on instead?

At this point, any progressive movement worth its salt would protest the mischaracterization of a high-profile meeting during a major primary battle. Imagine if Clinton had issued a press release that said “Clinton Defends Obama’s PEPFAR Funding at Meeting with HIV/AIDS Advocates,” without any mention that those advocates had strong complaints about Obama’s PEPFAR record. We would have gone ballistic. That’s exactly what happened with Sanders, and it would have been irresponsible of us -- and to all single-issue movements that meet with these and future candidates -- to quietly accept being used for campaign spin that might play well during an upcoming primary.

We issued a diplomatically worded rebuke (http://bit.ly/25qTtTi), and then the Sanders campaign hit strike three. Senior Policy Director Warren Gunnels repeated the Weinstein lies, and decided that attacking AIDS activists was smart politics.

He also sent an email that repeated the attacks (http://bit.ly/1UpNrcZ), but thankfully deleted the above tweet as he began to realize the misstep. Unfortunately, he seems to lack a level of decency and maturity required for admitting one’s mistakes.

Did we make mistakes? In hindsight, I see one. I shouldn’t have been the main contact for the Sanders campaign. Charles King, head of Housing Works, and my co-conspirator in launching this campaign to push the presidential candidates on HIV/AIDS, voted for Sanders in the New York primary and could have handled the negotiations just as well. Since I was a very public supporter of Clinton and a harsh critic of Michael Weinstein, I was unfortunately viewed with suspicion by the Sanders campaign. I had hoped my

evenhanded interactions with the campaign would be enough to calm any suspicions, but have learned this past week that that was never the case.

One thing’s for sure, our coalition has done some of the most amazing AIDS activism I’ve witnessed in recent years. We’ve grown to 90+ groups and leaders in this fight, and our diversity, unified focus, work ethic, and resolve have been a marvel to feel a part of. The AIDS community is stronger and more diverse than ever. Our next president will know this well.

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