The Leaning Tower: Media Coverage and the Perils of

Dialoguing in the 2006 Michigan Gubernatorial Election

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The best materials were available: a worst-in-the-nation unemployment rate, a depressed economy, an approval number in the 40s and an enormous majority believing that change was necessary in their government. Yet, despite having these exquisite building blocks and a team of the best architects in the nation to build a campaign, Republican challenger Dick DeVos collapsed his tower and lost in a landslide election. It was nothing short of a shocking turnaround for incumbent Democratic governor Jennifer Granholm of Michigan, considering the dire prognostications made during the summer before the election. In a poll taken in August Granholm's approval and disapproval ratings were statistically tied and even more worrisome, 64% of respondents believed the state was heading in the wrong direction (Strategic Vision Political). What appeared to be a guaranteed loss was further reinforced by her opponent's massive campaign budget. When the election was over, Granholm was outspent by DeVos $42.6 million to $18.8 million, an almost doubling of the previous election (Michigan Campaign Finance Network). In addition, Dick DeVos had a personal background in business, where he had made millions working with Alticor (formerly Amway), a major employer in Michigan (Barone 832). With all of these materials working in the favor of the challenger, it may be surprising that Granholm won the election by 14% (Barone 830). The question therefore, is how did the media and the campaign interact and what mistakes did DeVos make to lose by such a large margin. Looking closely at the media coverage and advertisements of the two candidates, it is clear that DeVos' campaign strategy was to keep a spotlight on Granholm's performance during her first term, especially in regards to job creation and economic performance. He correctly built his campaign on powerful performance themes and managed to frame the election around those issues in the media. His fatal error, however, was dialoguing on his own job-creation record at Alticor, moving the debate from performance to protectionism, an issue owned

by Democrats (Iyengar 142-143). By allowing the news to focus on himself, DeVos lost crucial support and eroded his chances of winning the governor's mansion. This paper will prove three interrelated parts of the election. The first is that the background of the candidates and the campaign advertisements were all focused on job-creation and economic performance, as well as the Single Business Tax – Michigan's unique tax on corporations. The second is that the news media focused heavily on economics in the lead up to the election, invariably setting the agenda for voters. The last part will show DeVos' mistake regarding dialoguing and how his poll numbers began to decline shortly thereafter, indicating a possible causal link.

Background of Michigan

Michigan is a moderate state that has faced many economic problems in recent years. Part of the Midwest industrial belt, downturns have hit the state hard, especially during the last recession. Michigan has faced enormously high unemployment figures, and in 2007, it again had the highest rate in the nation. Even more shocking, Michigan was the only state in the nation that year to have negative employment growth ("Michigan unemployment still tops in nation"). Using data from the Michigan Dept. of Labor and Economic Growth, Graph 1 plots the unemployment rate over time and shows that while Michigan has faced higher rates in the past, unemployment has risen in the last decade. The numbers show that since Granholm took office in 2003, she has managed to hold the unemployment rate constant, even if at a higher level that at the end of the 1990s. Nonetheless, the graph shows that Michigan has never truly recovered from the 2001 recession and continues to have problems retaining jobs today. A subset of the economy issue, and one of the more interesting themes in this campaign, was the abolition and replacement of the "Single Business Tax," Michigan's unique system of value-added tax on corporations and businesses. Its opponents have been fighting to have it repealed for years,

claming that it "levies the nation's highest effective tax rate on corporate income (over 15 percent), and extracts the 7th highest per capita corporate tax revenue" ("Single Business Tax is Dragging Down Michigan's Economy"). Despite aggressive attempts by Granholm to prevent it from being eliminated without being replaced with new revenue, opponents managed to petition for its repeal, a process she could not veto (Michigan SBT Replacement Tax). Therefore, both candidates were confronted with the question of what sort of tax to replace it, and how they were going to solve the $2 billion deficit caused by its repeal. Midway into the campaign, and indeed throughout it, neither side desired to provide specifics on their plans (Crane's Detroit Business). Altogether, the economy and the Single Business Tax represent important background on the political environment in Michigan during 2006.

The Background of the Candidates

The candidates' background and how they introduced themselves to voters is important to the economic issues that dominated the campaign. Since she was the incumbent, Granholm focused little on her background. She was born in Canada and attended the University of California – Berkeley and Harvard Law School, a combination of "liberal" locations that had been used to attack her in the past. These tactics were not effective when she first ran, and indeed, DeVos rarely made such points (Barone 830-831). According to her official biography, her main issues are the economy and protecting families[1] ("Biography"). Unlike Granholm, DeVos needed to establish his background. He came into the race as an unknown political candidate, although his family is largely invested in Michigan industry (Barone 832). He focused his biography on his business experience and his ability to create industrial and manufacturing jobs. In his first campaign biographical advertisement called "New Direction," he

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[1] It is notable that she has borrowed this particular issue from the Republicans, although this is not an issue under discussion in this paper

discusses his work at Alticor and how he restructured management. As the commercial closes, the script finishes with "Dick turned this company around and saved jobs." Another example can be seen in "Back to Work," where DeVos transitions from his background to his reason for running, saying, "My campaign is pretty straightforward, it's about getting Michigan back to work," while driving a car through a neighborhood. Both ads establish his background in the areas where Granholm is weakest, framing the campaign around her performance.

The Timeline of the Election and Important Campaign Events

Using the Detroit Free Press as the newspaper of record for Michigan, it is easy to see the storylines that started in earnest at the beginning of 2006. DeVos quickly became the presumptive nominee for the Republicans due to his personal fortune and his ability to self-finance his own campaign (Almanac 832). In a signal of what was to come, the year began with a State of the State address by Granholm in which she declared that "In five years, you are going to be blown away by the strength and diversity of Michigan's transformed economy" (Qtd in "Granholm: State on road to recovery"). The beginning of that phrase would be seized by the DeVos campaign as emblematic of a leader who is eternally optimistic and unwilling to see the reality of ordinary citizens. On March 7, 2006, a major article placed the Single Business Tax within the context of the campaigns, stating, "Many businesses agree: Mich. tax is stumbling block: Divide lies in how to improve on it," predicting the heated debate over the future of this policy ("Many businesses agree"). On April 1, 2007, Granholm vetoed the Single Business Tax, which would later be undone by a petition that forced its elimination ("Next plan to kill tax"). By this time, DeVos has been spending millions on advertising, which the newspaper said, "Until Friday's event, the gubernatorial campaign has been dominated by DeVos' television advertising. The two-month blitz, estimated to cost about $3 million so far, has been credited

with swaying enough voters to bring the race to a virtual dead heat, according to recent

independent polls" ("DeVos, Granholm fire early salvos"). Up until this time, Granholm had not

fought against DeVos advertising campaign; that would change on June 9 when the state

Democratic party began running ads ("ELECTION 2006: Granholm joins campaign ad war").

The back and forth of the campaigns continued until August, when a major change occurred

during the conventions of the two parties. Granholm began a new attack, and the one that would

eventually end DeVos's campaign chances. She described him as "a CEO who cut jobs in

Michigan to invest in Asia" ("Granholm, DeVos fire off accusations as race begins"). The error

DeVos made was choosing not to ignore the bait. Shortly thereafter, and supposedly without

coordination, Alticor ran positive ads to burnish its pro-Michigan image ("Pro-Alticor ads follow

criticism of DeVos"). By early September though, Granholm began fully exploiting Alticor's

connection to China. In a September 10, 2006 article in the Detroit Free Press, the reporters

write that "With just over eight weeks until the Nov. 7 election, the closely contested

gubernatorial race has turned nasty with a focus on DeVos and China […]" ("GOVERNOR'S

RACE: TV ads sharpen attacks on rivals"). The final death knell for the DeVos campaign would

be his unreasonable and inconsistent debate performance (Barone 832). As an editorial stated,

"Political debates usually find challengers on the attack and incumbents playing defense. But

Gov. Jennifer Granholm reversed roles on Dick DeVos in their first debate Monday night,

keeping her Republican opponent on the defensive for much of their hour together"

("EDITORIAL: ELECTION 2006: Advantage: Granholm: Governor won debate with

specifics"). While the accusations continued to fly throughout October, DeVos would never

recover his lead. These storylines are the framework from which both candidates ran their

campaigns.

Focusing the Message on the Economy

DeVos focused the majority of his advertisements on the economy, and this would eventually become the central issue of the campaign. Out of the 30 ads placed on YouTube by his campaign under the username DickDeVos, 22 were about the economy and twelve of those were directly negative of Granholm and her performance. Throughout the ads, the campaign specifically highlighted two of Granholm's sound bites to demonstrate her poor performance. The first was her State of the State comment that "[…] in five years, you're going to be blown away […]" and the other sound bite was from the Democratic convention, in which Granholm said "[…] We are thrilled with how this economic plan is working" ("Politician"). This particular line would be used in the majority of the attack ads created against her, attempting to shift the focus onto her dismal economic record. The most blatant example of this shift can be seen in the ad "Fired." The commercial begins with a narrator reading the line, "What is this campaign about? Jobs." The ad then moves on to describe Michigan's bad employment numbers and says that Granholm does not understand the situation. Then it proceeds to clip the MDP convention speech mentioned above, followed by the words "And that is why Jennifer Granholm should lose her job" ("Fired"). It clearly focuses on the economic performance of the incumbent as a means of winning support. Indeed, all of the ads by DeVos are designed to begin a process of close introspection by voters, in the hope of having a Reagan "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" moment. It was not just his negative advertisements that focused on economic performance though. Among his positive ads is "What he Makes," in which he is endorsed by Lee Iacocca, the former head of Chrysler. In one of the telling lines of the ad, Iacocca says that the "And the most important thing that Dick DeVos makes is Michigan jobs" ("What he Makes"). Even his positive advertisements focus on the same subject. Altogether,

DeVos focused almost exclusively on Michigan's economy, framing the race on the economic

performance of the incumbent.

The Policy Issue: Michigan's Single Business Tax in the Campaign

As mentioned previously, Michigan's Single Business Tax (SBT) was a subset of the

economy debate in the 2006 campaign. This particular issue is interesting since it is rather

technical for a campaign. Surprisingly, three of DeVos' campaign ads reference the particular

tax law, and two of them focus on it as the main point of the advertisement. In the early stages of

the campaign, DeVos focused on his own record regarding the tax. In "Complex," the narrator

says, "[He is] The only candidate with a plan to get rid of the Single Business Tax, the outdated

tax that punishes modern employers and drives away jobs," followed by DeVos saying that

"Michigan is the only state that still has this tax and that's got to change" ("Complex"). The

issue would not die away, even though its fate was known in the late stages of the campaign. In

late August, the campaign launched "Survive," an ad featuring a small business owner who

argues that he cannot continue to survive in the current economic climate of Michigan. He says,

"No other state has a Single Business Tax. The governor has had more than enough time to

make things happen. She does not know how to create jobs." The SBT is being framed as

Granholm's mistake and connects the real world situation of Michigan with a law she refused to

repeal. The issue was used one final time in an ad called "Twice." The narrator says, "For three

years, Governor Granholm has refused to repeal the Single Business Tax" ("Twice"). All of

these ads highlight a specific policy issue that voters would recognize and then demonstrate that

the incumbent failed to handle it effectively. The Single Business Tax is an important

component of the campaign and demonstrates one of the few substantive issues that was debated,

while also providing a metric to measure discussion of Michigan's economy. Altogether, the

background of Michigan and the candidates, as well as DeVos' campaign strategy, demonstrate that the economy was the main focus of the challenger.

Data Acquisition and Methodology

With the background and advertisements fully discussed, it is time to link the effect that these building blocks had on the media coverage of the campaign. This survey of media coverage relies on the LexisNexis database. The particular source of publication was a group called "Newspaper Stories, Combined Papers," which includes all press in newspapers throughout the United States. The great majority of the articles that referenced the campaign were found in local newspapers, although the storylines of the campaign occasionally made national media outlets such as The New York Times and The Washington Post. Searches were conducted on each month of 2006, conveniently covering the range from DeVos' kickoff in February to the election in November and providing comparison data in the months of January and December. For this section, seven search phrases were monitored. The first is "single business tax," which can be used to gauge relative coverage of Michigan's economy in the campaign.[2] From there, three sets of terms were combined with the candidates name to find relative coverage of articles mentioning both the term itself and the candidate's last name together. The three terms were "economy," "jobs," and the phrase "single business tax." For economy and jobs, "Dick" was added as a search term in addition to DeVos, due to a number of additional news stories from New Zealand and Florida which would undermine the data. Since he is likely to be introduced with his full name at least once in an article, this change should have a minimal effect on his prevalence in the media.

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[2] Since there are such a diverse number of stories on Michigan's economy, this particular term allows a better focus on the election and its use of the economy.

The Data: What the Media Covered

Looking through Graphs 2-4, it is clear that the economy was receiving the most amount of coverage, and due to the agenda setting nature of the media, this means that it was the issue that voters were likely bringing to the polls. The trends in all three of the graphs are clear: the terms became significantly more prevalent as the election approached, after having built up as an issue throughout the campaign. Another notable pattern is the close changes between the coverage of the two candidates and the terms. This is likely due to the objective nature of journalists who wish to balance stories with both side's comments. The slight edge given to Granholm is to be expected of an incumbent, since he or she is inherently more newsworthy. Of the three graphs, Graph 2 focusing on jobs is by far the most interesting and insightful. Both candidates wanted to be known as job-creators, and getting that message out in the media was an important element of that strategy. At the beginning of the year, Granholm had significantly more press coverage on the issue of jobs than DeVos, since she was the incumbent. More importantly, the stories continued to focus on her record far more than discussions of jobs and DeVos. In fact, until the China mistake came into play in September, he had been successful in keeping her in the spotlight. Regardless of whether the stories were positive or negative, this was a major accomplishment of staying on message. Unfortunately for him, his dialoguing on China increased its presence in September and pushed out the needed stories on Granholm's performance, as will be discussed later. Lastly, the graph shows that the issue is still relatively important for the future, although it has decreased to a level even less than before the race. Graph 3 shows a broader comparison between Granholm and DeVos. Granholm's coverage decreased after January, and only returned in September. DeVos steadily increased his coverage throughout the year, but clearly failed in linking his campaign to this issue and competing with

her. One other important note is that the absolute number of stories is much lower for the economy than with jobs, demonstrating one of the nuances of this campaign. Finally, Graph 4 shows the prevalence of the phrase "Single Business Tax," in regards to the two candidates. Beyond an unusual dip in September that was likely caused by the negative campaign rhetoric moving the focus from policy issues to campaign tactics, the Single Business Tax became increasingly more prevalent in the media as the election approached. What is particularly interesting about this subject is that DeVos managed to match Granholm's coverage on this issue in the two months before the election. This was a powerful issue for his campaign and demonstrated that he could compete with the incumbent for the media's spotlight. One other important trend in the graph is the enormous difference in press coverage of the raw term and the term connected with the other two candidates. There are only two possibilities: either the term was used in articles that did not mention either candidate or the candidates were discussed individually in regards to the SBT. Reading the articles shows that most of the stories were the former, mostly letters to the editor or opinion columns. This indicates a significant debate on the tax independent of either candidate. Overall, all three of these terms become significantly more prevalent as the election approached, demonstrating that the campaign ads by both sides have led to a focus on this particular portfolio of issues. DeVos properly framed the election in terms of economic performance, and the media's agenda setting ability forced voters to consider such issues in their opinions.

The China Issue: The Mistake of the DeVos Campaign

While no one issue brought the downfall of Dick DeVos from his polling highs in August, it is clear that he did not keep the same intensity on Granholm's record as he had before. The China issue had been simmering throughout the campaign, beginning with a news

conference between the two sides. As reported in a March 21, 2006 news article in the Grand

Rapids Press, the two representatives of the candidates had testy words for each other, and the

Democrat would make a rebuttal that would become this signature issue: "An obviously irritated

Truscott said DeVos 'is the only job-maker in Michigan.' Shot back Brewer: 'He created them

in China, not Michigan'" ("Shouting match erupts at news conference"). That vitriol would only

expand throughout the campaign, especially in late August during the party conventions. His

mistake, however, began when he switched tactics. At the Republican convention, DeVos began

responding to these attacks less aggressively and more positively, saying, "There is only one

candidate in this race who has ever run a manufacturing company […] There is only one

candidate in this race who has competed in China and won, creating jobs here at home in

Michigan" ("DeVos drives home his key points"). His more amenable argument directed

coverage onto the issue, a fact exploited by the Granholm campaign. This led to a famous

exchange over the airwaves. DeVos had said that the products made in China by Alticor were

sold in China ("Compete"). The Granholm campaign came back with an ad featuring a teddy

bear. The narrator says, "See this teddy bear. Bought in the U.S. by Dick DeVos' company.

What's on the tag? Made in China. Why won't Dick DeVos tell us the truth?" ("Off Shore 2").

To show how powerful these arguments were against him, Chart 5 shows the level of press

coverage of the words "DeVos Granholm China," using the methodology described above. The

line for China articles has been recalculated for November based on coverage in the days before

the election, and then multiplied by the days of the month.[3] As can be seen clearly in the graph,

Granholm began strongly pulling ahead as the coverage of the two candidates and China

increased. While this does not identify causation of these two events, it does show a link

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[3] There were 25 China articles in November, 18 of them before the election. That is an average
of three articles a day, and therefore "90" for the month.

between them, especially since both sides ran ads discussing the issue and reframed their campaigns.   Dick DeVos dialogued on the issue of China, and immediately began increasing the amount of coverage it received, moving the spotlight away Granholm's economic performance.

Final Analysis: What Propelled Granholm to Victory

With the media coverage focused on jobs in mind, it is important to understand how Granholm, with her poor record of job-creation, was able to transform such a poor performance into a positive for her campaign. First, Democrats generally own job security according to the theory of issue ownership (Iyengar 142-143). This means that when given two candidates, voters will tend to trust and believe a Democrat on the issues of labor and job-creation. In this case, however, DeVos carefully formulated his image to be one of a discerning businessman who could run large enterprises and build a workforce. This probably rendered the issue neutral in the campaign – an effect that can be seen in the polling data that shows him ahead of Granholm in April through August. DeVos' primary objective then was staying on message. As one columnist put it, "Success for DeVos, however, may depend on keeping the spotlight on Granholm's economic record - or lack of it" (RealClearPolitics). The problem for him was that he was unsuccessful in this regard. He made the fatal error early in his campaign when he used his business as an absolute example of how he would run Michigan. Alticor, unfortunately, had offshored several hundred jobs from Michigan to China, and had also invested millions of dollars there, bringing protectionist arguments into the campaign. DeVos was correct in choosing the economy to focus his attacks, but his campaign's incessant focus on his tenure at Alticor would eventually poison it. When voters learned of certain unpopular elements (even if likely to occur in all businesses), they quickly turned off, as shown by his tanking poll numbers in September, October and on election day. In fact, exit polls show that 84% believed the economy was doing

poorly or not good (Roper Center Dataset Abstract). Clearly, DeVos got his message out there, but people were just not looking for a change to someone who supported outsourcing.

Conclusion

Dick DeVos had all of the materials necessary when he ran for governor in early 2006. He had a state with one of the worst economic track records, an enormous unemployment rate and a business tax that was widely considered unfair and bureaucratic (which the incumbent refused to repeal). He even had a background that was perfectly suited for the campaign, including turning a large Michigan corporation around and generally improving jobs. Finally, he had the personal fortune to make sure that the public heard his message. He carefully built up his image and framed the campaign onto the issues of the economy and job-creation. The media was following these particular angles as well, as seen in the coverage graphs during the election year. With all of these ingredients and with a perfect setup, he failed in one regard: he erroneously dialogued on himself, when he should have stayed on his message. Indeed, the entire campaign after August can be simplified to a dialogue between two bad job-creators. DeVos' mistake was not keeping his entire campaign focused on Granholm. Voters, a majority of whom are Democratic, quickly returned to the party after realizing that the candidates were both touting a similar platform, a platform from which Democrats hold an advantage according to the theory of issue ownership. Without any delineation made between them, they choose the more personal Granholm instead of the business-like DeVos. If there is anything to take away from this campaign, it is the need to stay on message. DeVos had the perfect materials, but no amount of construction can outdo a poorly executed architectural plan.

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