



Employing A **M.E.A.N. Strategy** for Election Outcomes

Cecil E. Howard, J.D.

Contributing Author: Moses Pyatt

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy



Copyright © 2023 Cecil E. Howard

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission from the copyright holder, except by reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review; nor may any part of this book be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or other without prior written permission from the copyright holder.

ISBN: 979-8-89238-106-2 eBook

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

Table Of Contents

Introduction.....5

Mobilization.....8

Education.....11

Advocacy.....13

Navigation.....17

Conclusion.....20

INTRODUCTION

The American public, particularly those most marginalized and abused by politicians seeking to restrict rights are fed up! As such, we can no longer sit idly by and allow bully politicians to serve their assault on human and civil rights. We must get mean and fight the bullies back!

When I survey the vitriolic political landscape in America that has evolved over the past couple of decades, I see a type of meanness that may have been simmering for decades, although many in America may not have realizing what they were seeing. Politicians throwing shoes at the President of the United States, and other politicians proposing and adopting laws that were (and still are) inherently abusive, discriminatory, and outright harmful to minority populations, all because of their majority representative status, are some examples of the types of meanness displayed by bullies.

If that were not enough, basic human and civil rights that at one time afforded some sense of equality to minority populations, are eroding at a rapid pace and such actions are led by politicians with majority votes who, frankly, just do not care! They started taking such actions simply because they had the voting majorities to do so. It is as if they decided they only had a short window to change America to the America of old before America realized what happened.

As my wise grandmother would often tell us, "you must fight fire with fire." Initially, I could never understand that idiom as I always looked at things very literal and thought the best weapon against fire was water. I finally realized what she meant when I stood up to a bully when I was twelve years old. He would always harass me for no reason, and because he was a bully, I never challenged him. Finally, one day I got tired of the harassment. The bully walked up to me and slapped me on my head and before realizing what I had done, I punched him in the face. When he realized I was prepared to challenge his actions, he walked away and never bullied me again.

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

After being summoned into the house by my mother, and completely surprised that the bully had essentially backed down, I said to myself while air boxing in front of the bathroom mirror, “yeah, I gave him some of his own fire!” As soon as I uttered those words, I remembered my grandmother saying, “Son, you got to fight fire with fire!” I then finally understood her statement about fire.

When I sit back and view all the policies, laws, and court decisions coming out of all three branches of government at the federal and state levels, I cannot help but concede that in 2023, America as a whole, is in a fight for its democracy, and Black America, specifically, is in a fight for its freedom. Unbelievably, we are at the point of reliving the very history that millions of lives were sacrificed to change. Supreme Court precedent is being reversed at a rapid pace, and constitutional provisions are being watered down, and even ignored. The strategy of taking America back to the dark ages is in full effect, and if those who are most negatively impacted by such actions are asleep at the wheel, by the time we realize what happened, it will be too late!

Our democracy is seriously in jeopardy! To make matters worse, we are hearing words like “succession” uttered that have not been uttered since the civil war. Voting lines are being redrawn by conservative majorities to obliterate the impact of the minority vote. And, those redrawing such lines are ignoring court decisions to undo such atrocities. Again, our democracy is seriously in jeopardy!

We must resist these abusive actions. We must be vigilant, keep watchful guard at all times, and be ready to fend off further actions. We must prepare to fight fire with fire!

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

Many may ask how we fight fire with fire! Well, in preparation for the 2022 midterm elections, I introduced the M.E.A.N. Strategy (Sometimes referred to as “The Strategy”) as an effort to collectively respond to a fully developed mean and vitriolic political and legislative agenda that has come to fruition right before our very eyes.

The Strategy is intended to convey a strong message, and at the same time detail a process for action. We need to get mean and return fire to those mean policies and actions that are wreaking havoc upon us and our communities.

The M.E.A.N. Strategy is simple, yet highly effective in its fully implemented augmentation. M.E.A.N is an acronym representing the words *Mobilization*, *Education*, *Advocacy*, and *Navigation*. In many instances of our community service, we conduct the forms of each of the words individually, but the strategy becomes most effective when each component is implemented in ways to complement the other.

The key to getting people interested and excited about the electoral process is to get them to understand the issues that impact them individually and as a community. The more they understand the issues, and the more they understand that they have the power to impact outcomes, the more likely they will cast votes. The Strategy, in and of itself, does not contemplate support or advocacy for specific candidates or political parties. It merely aims to encourage people to evaluate their own circumstances in order to ascertain where change or improvement is needed, and once such evaluation is conducted, the education component of the Strategy will assist them in identifying which candidate is best poised to meet their needs.

Following, are understandings and examples of the four components of the Strategy. Effective implementation of all four components provides greater opportunities to maximize outcomes, although focus upon a single component, (especially mobilization and education), will bring about some success as well.

MOBILIZATION

Mobilization of voters and prospective voters is a critical initial step. This includes voter registration efforts, (including pre-registration for teens who have not turned eighteen years old), rallies, silent protests, prayer vigils, ride along programs, transportation assistance, community canvassing, telephone banks, Souls to the Polls events, voter registration day parties, post church service events, and establishment of coalitions with grassroots groups such as NAACP, National Council of Negro Women, fraternities/sororities, unions, and other marginalized, minority, or often discriminated groups.

Other innovative examples include fitness centers that offer free workouts for newly registered voters, photographers offering free professional headshots for individuals wearing their “I Voted” stickers, or hamburger stops giving free French fries to those showing their “I Voted” stickers.

Oftentimes during election season (about six months before actual elections) many organizations will engage a few of the examples listed above. The problem they encounter however, is typically they are months, and even years late in beginning or restarting such efforts. Mobilization planning should begin immediately after the last election, starting with assessing what contributed to successes or failures during such elections.

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

Some groups do in fact begin immediately assessing what happened when they are on the losing side of campaigns. They develop a “never again” mindset and immediately transition into planning for the next election. Oftentimes these groups are organized political parties, legislative delegations, and political leaders who discuss and implement strategies in response to the successful strategies that prevailing interests utilized successfully. For example, during the first election of Raphael Warnock to the United States Senate, the State of Georgia witnessed a massive voter turnout of Democrats propelled by a record turnout of Black voters in the metro Atlanta voting districts. During that election, America also witnessed massive mobilization efforts with groups providing umbrellas, water, snacks, and other amenities and assistance to voters of all backgrounds and political affiliations who waited in long lines and inclement weather to cast ballots.

In response to those highly effective mobilization efforts, legislators in Georgia and many other states filed bills or amended statutes that had the intended effect of limiting those efforts. For example, during the legislative session after the 2020 general election, the Georgia General Assembly adopted Senate Bill 202, which provided that, “No person shall give, offer to give, or participate in the giving of any money or gifts, including, but not limited to, food and drink, to an elector...” Such activity is now deemed a felony offense under Georgia law.

Fortunately, the majority of Georgia’s voting public (especially those in Metro Atlanta districts) turned out in record numbers twenty months later during Senator Warnock’s second election and propelled him to victory. Had there not been a strong ground game, massive mobilization efforts within the confines of the new Georgia law, the outcome of the election could have been different.

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

In today's political arena, elections of candidates are less about experience and qualifications, and more about representation of political parties or political interests. That is why the Strategy must be worked to perfection. If groups want to see candidates in office whose interests are similar to theirs, they must devise strong mobilization strategies very early, and also begin implementing those strategies very early. Waiting until "election season" to begin planning or even implantation, will be too late. Remember, the individual, group, or party that lost the previous election will have been strategizing since the day after that election. You must begin your planning the next day, as well.

EDUCATION

Education of voters and prospective voters is one area that provides the greatest opportunity to get voters and candidates face to face, but this area tends to receive less allocation of time. Many would refer to candidate rallies similar to what they see national candidates do, or even radio and television advertisements as educational. While such efforts provide great opportunities to familiarize the public with candidates, those efforts only provide small glimpses into candidates' backgrounds and history, thereby giving the public only tidbits of information to rely upon before casting ballots.

Reliance upon those mediums does not provide as much opportunity for the public to really know much about the candidates. Certainly, candidates' opponents will point out their failures, voting records, and other negative aspects as they engage in oppositional research about each other, but remember, the opposing candidates are only giving the public what they want the public to know; not the full stories of the candidates. It is incumbent upon individuals to ensure that those candidates' full bodies of work, or lack thereof, are brought before the public. If candidates have served in public office previously, research their voting records; identify what issues they supported or failed to support; consider the issues they have been most closely aligned with; research their non-profit endeavors; ascertain their views regarding family values, diversity and inclusion; check to see what newspaper editorial boards had to say about them.

What have the candidates written about themselves? Sometimes, in an effort to garner greater support, candidates might write opinion articles (referred to as op eds).

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

While those articles are sure to elicit favorable opinions for the authors, such opinions may give readers greater insight into candidates' positions or mindsets, which may be the impetus for greater research into the candidates' backgrounds.

Some examples of educational aspects would be townhall debates, candidate forums, voter restoration trainings, and barbershop talks, which have been a remarkably effective way to connect with Black and Latino men. (More about that later). Other examples include voter education forums that teach voters how to read ballots before casting votes, when and how to participate in early elections, how to properly request and submit mail-in and absentee ballots, and how to recruit future candidates.

Sometimes, organizations may not feel they have the capacity or human capital to engage in some of the educational aspects of elections. When that is the case, a good strategy might be to reach out to larger, more seasoned organizations and offer to assist them in their endeavors. Every organization does not have to be the lead in educating the public; collaborative engagement is just as effective, if not more effective. Many organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, NAACP, and Fair Fight are always looking for volunteers from other organizations.

One critical factor to stress to voters and prospective voters when engaging the educational component is the notion that efforts to educate them is not tantamount to support or endorsement of any particular candidate, issue, or party. Trust and credibility are paramount. Such trust and credibility provide voters the opportunity to think clearly and rationally, and increases the likelihood that they will participate in an election once they have formulated their own opinions and conclusions about candidates. Your goal is to get them to vote!

ADVOCACY

Advocacy for voters has taken on a level of greater importance in recent years, primarily due to the vitriolic landscape that has evolved regarding campaigns.

Shortness, abruptness, rudeness, and in some instances, ignorance of laws or processes by precinct workers have been alleged by many voters over the years. Those actions have the persuasive effect of forcing some people to turn around and go home without ever casting a ballot.

Hundreds of voting and civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, Fair Fight, American Civil Liberties Union, Black Lives Matter, Common Cause, We The Action, and When We All Vote, etc., spend incredible amounts of time educating voters about their rights and how to stand their ground when precinct workers attempt to turn them around without casting a vote.

Many grass roots groups do the same and will even provide volunteer lawyers or elections experts to stand within legally allowable distances from the voting precincts to provide on-site assistance to voters. This level of assistance exists for the sole purpose of giving voters the opportunity to cast provisional ballots. In fact, a simple rule of thumb is to never leave the precinct without at least casting a provisional ballot, no matter the issue. Federal law requires that provisional ballots be provided to voters when requested and voting and civil rights advocates waste little time making those requests or instructing voters to make such requests.

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

Some common issues raised at the voting booth are unacceptable identification, wrong voting precinct, names being purged from voting rolls for lack of recent voting, voting ineligibility, and double voting in the same election. The various states, however, have differing laws regarding many of those issues. To make matters worse, over thirty state's laws have been revised since the 2020 Presidential election in order to make aiding voters more difficult. Some states amended laws to decrease the number of ballot box drop-off points; some decreased the deadline to apply for mail-in ballots, and some shortened the early voting periods.

It is critically important to understand all the laws of your state before providing any type of advocacy assistance, or any other assistance for that matter, because if alleged violations are proven, civil or criminal penalties could follow. All of the civil rights organizations just referenced will provide links to the various states elections laws on their websites.

The safest and most effective way to provide advocacy assistance is to partner with those organizations that provide advocacy as a major piece of their work. One of my favorite organizations is the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, (floridarrc.com). Thanks to passage of Amendment 4, (the Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative) in 2018, the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition has been leading the effort to assist over One Million previously convicted individuals residing in Florida with getting their voting rights restored.

Despite the success of Amendment 4, the Florida Legislature adopted Senate Bill 7066 in 2019 which required people with felony records to “pay all fines and fees associated with their sentence prior to the restoration of their voting rights”. Due to the Florida Legislature’s action, previously convicted individuals currently do not automatically have the right to vote after completing all terms of their sentences including parole or probation. They could, however, have their rights restored if their cases are taken before judges on Motions for Modification of Sentence, which, if successful, would result in their financial obligations (i.e., fines and court costs) being removed so that they could register to vote.

When providing restoration of rights advocacy, it is important to make sure previously convicted individuals’ do in fact meet requirements for restoration. The Florida law prohibits those convicted of murder and felony sex offenses from having their rights restored. Many previously convicted individuals, however, do not know that, and will register to vote pursuant to directions that they proceed with registration upon the belief that the system will reject them if they are not eligible. In several cases in Florida, the registration process did not catch the fact that those individuals were not eligible to vote based on the nature of their convictions. As a result, in 2021, the State of Florida issued arrest warrants for several of those individuals and in some instances, made public arrests in front of news cameras.

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

Due to public arrests of individuals mistakenly thinking their rights to vote had been legally restored, many other previously convicted individuals are now afraid to seek restoration because they believe such action will lead to their arrests and convictions. This fear should only lead to further education and training as referenced in the education chapter. In fact, advocates should routinely mention that restoration of rights trainings are available, and that many organizations provide attorneys to not only explain eligibility requirements, but also to train other attorneys how to litigate Motions for Modification of Sentence before judges. Those lawyers will typically voluntarily take on a handful of cases for the public good.

Another aspect closely related to the circumstance of previously convicted individuals is when individuals are incarcerated but have not been convicted of criminal offenses. Those individuals are merely housed in county jails awaiting trial, but many have complained that they do not get the opportunity to participate in the electoral process. These matters should be publicly brought before the county sheriff's offices, state and local officials, media, and civil rights and grassroots groups who will address them accordingly.

Other advocacy measures include becoming poll workers, speaking at redistricting meetings, engaging in letter-writing campaigns to state and federal officials, writing "op-eds" about candidates, issues, or actions that are felt to be contrary to the public's general interests, and speaking on radio shows about those matters.

The bottom line with advocacy is to always speak up and out about matters. The more advocates publicly take positions for or against matters, the more the public pays attention, and becomes more interested in the electoral process.

NAVIGATION

The Navigation aspect of the Strategy is probably the least understood, yet it has the greatest impact. Some may consider it to be an aspect of the education component, but I tend to separate it simply because the education component should focus on learning as much about the candidates as possible.

The navigation component centers around learning about political processes. Most voters do not pay close attention to issues, bills, and proposals when those matters are in their infancy. We tend to wait until the media, or watchdog groups bring attention to the matters, usually when such matters are heading toward votes from one committee to another. As a former lobbyist, a former senior state official, and a former senior local government official, I have seen many instances where members of the public flooded hearing rooms, submitted their requests to provide comments, and took strong positions for or against issues that had essentially already been decided before the hearings even started. While public officials are typically forbidden from engaging in decision making with each other outside of public meetings, they are able to assert their influence to gain support from their fellow representatives in a myriad of other ways and will typically know where the votes are well before the meetings begin.

When we understand the navigational route of decisions from the very beginning, we can see the early influences, and that is where we can begin to assert our own influences. Politicians always take the pulse of their voters or the voters they hope to influence before they sign onto possible legislative matters. That is why we should be paying close attention to their every move, by attending their forums and press conferences, and thoroughly studying the ways they ask questions or seek information. When they know early on that voters are watching them, such actions by the public will impact the politicians' maneuverings.

We need to study candidates and see how their platforms align with our own political ideology. Studying newspaper editorials might be a good source of information, particularly if candidates have run for public office previously. Political entities such as city and county governments, state capitals and the US Capitol all maintain historical voting records of candidates if those candidates served prior to their candidacy. Most of the information is easily accessible from the Internet, but when internet access proves fruitless, public records laws in every state as well as the United States require governmental bodies to provide some access as long as individuals wanting specific information make requests for them. Some states' laws require the document requests to be in writing, while some do not make the writing a criterion. Those same laws also provide civil and/or criminal sanctions when governmental officials refuse to provide access to documents, so do not hesitate to be as bold as possible in pursuit of public records.

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

Another major aspect of navigation centers around groups' visits to state capitals and the U.S. Capitol. Typically, groups will visit their representatives' offices, introduce themselves, and take photos. The visits might also include legislative update sessions, and maybe visits to the public gallery to watch the lawmakers at work.

The model is not very effective in impacting legislation. While the legislative visits can be moderately effective, typically, by the time groups get to their respective "Day at the Capital," to address issues, it is probably too late to make major impacts upon legislation.

Effective navigation entails discerning when bills are filed, which is usually six to eight months before the legislative sessions even begins. Utilizing states' public records laws to request copies of filed bills at the time of the filing, gives groups the opportunity to begin lobbying for or against provisions in the bills, strategizing how to defeat or support such bills, or to seek legislative champions to file other bills supporting such groups' agendas.

The navigational aspect must be very intentional. Visits to legislators and state capitals ought to be less about photo opportunities, and more about impact that resulted from doing homework. If solid homework and early planning persists, the impacts will be insurmountable.

CONCLUSION

Earlier, I mentioned the fact about men not participating in the electoral process in huge numbers. Most research tends to support the notion that men of color vote less than their female counterparts. While men tend to be more conservative than women, there tends to be less enthusiasm, less optimism, and quite frankly, less trust amongst them toward our systems of government that are disproportionately led by white men.

Equipped with this knowledge, it is important to creatively seek out ways to bring new voters into the electoral process. Getting seasoned voters back to the polls after a primary, or for a midterm election can always be a challenge. Oftentimes, they only show up for the big elections, or what some refer to as “the real McCoy,” or “the Real Deal.” That is why the Strategy has to be employed to include new plateaus. The Barbershop Talks that I referred to previously are a good example of that type of creativity. Within Black communities for example, barbershops and hair salons are among the most popularly owned businesses, and it is not uncommon to have several shops within the same one or two city blocks.

Despite patrons' addresses, or their educational and socioeconomic levels, they will find themselves in a barbershop or hair salon on a regular basis and will also find themselves engaged in conversations regarding politics, economic development, education, and social justice, just to name a few. Back when I had hair, I visited the barbershop once per week, and have been in many barbershop conversations regarding elections only to hear many black men state that they would not vote and would then proceed to give their personal reasons for not doing so. I have heard statements that their votes would not count because "they [the system] were going to put the person they wanted in office anyway;" that "they [politicians] are all the same, in that they lie just to get support, but after winning, they don't live up to their words;" and that "they [politicians] are too phony and only come to visit our churches during campaign season."

I have also seen many instances in barbershops where patrons were completely oblivious to the fact that active voting was going on, but after being educated, they immediately went to cast ballots. I am reminded of an instance when I travelled to metro Atlanta to participate in barbershop talks on the last day of early voting for a high stakes runoff election. After spending an hour or so inside the shop reminding the men that that day was the last day to cast an early vote, and discussing the pros and cons of early voting, several men left the shop indicating they were heading straight to the courthouse to cast their vote in advance of election day.

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

In another shop on that same day, several of us began discussing the inadequate nature of recreational facilities to keep young men out of trouble, police brutality, and domestic terrorism. Finally, one of the patrons stated, "They're not going to do anything to make life better for us; they don't care about us." That comment was the perfect lead-in to discuss the importance of voting. I recalled stating, "well if you don't think they care about you, make them care about your vote, but they will never care about your vote unless they know about your vote." As a result of that conversation, several patrons indicated they would go and cast their early votes that particular day.

At the end of the day, voters need to know that they matter; they need to know their individual votes can and will make huge differences. They must feel secure that "the system" is not rigged against them, or that decisions about specific candidates were not already made before votes were cast.

Voters need to know that the power is squarely within their hands. If not, the politicians would not spend millions of dollars campaigning; nor would they take time out of their schedules to visit local churches once every campaign season. When voters understand they have the power to impact election outcomes, they bring a certain level of enthusiasm to the table and are more apt to engage others in various mobilization, educational, advocacy and navigational efforts. Our job is to build that level of trust and motivation within those prospective voters' minds, so that they may tell others of their previous doubts, as they convince them to become actively engaged in the electoral process.

Once greater percentages of citizens in our communities become more engaged in the electoral process, we will then be able to see how effectively we control our own destiny. When we don't control our own destiny, vestiges of America's dark past will repeat itself. It's time to turn the tide and fight fire with fire. It's time to get M.E.A.N.!

Employing a M.E.A.N. Strategy

.

