



The Simple but Largely Unknown Formula for Determining EXACTLY How Many Votes You Need to Win

The number one question most candidates are asked by donors is: Why are you running? Let's hope your answer is because you want to DO something, not BE somebody.

But the second most-asked question is: How many votes do you need to win?

I'm amazed at how many candidates have no idea how to answer that question. For those who do venture a guess, the answer is usually some rounded-off number they plucked from the sky. "Oh, around 20,000 votes."

God help 'em if someone ever asks how they came up with their figure. Most often, it's just an uneducated guess ... at best.

This does not earn you points or the confidence of potential donors and supporters.

However, let's say if someone asks how many votes you need to win, and you answer - with no hesitation and genuine confidence - "19,272!"

Well, bust my buttons! That immediately tells the other party that you've done some serious homework - and will almost guarantee the amazed follow-up question, "How'd you come up with that figure?"

Here's how...

But first, a disclaimer. The way to determine how many votes you need to win is based on historical voting patterns and generally similar election conditions. You can use the following formula as a pretty accurate guide for most races, but you also MUST be aware of special circumstances in your particular race which might affect the outcome and/or change the figures.

A perfect example was the 1994 congressional races. Had conservative voter turnout followed historical voting patterns, Democrats would have remained the majority party in the U.S. House of Representatives. But, for various reasons - Hillary's attempt to nationalize the health care system, the 1993 Clinton tax increase, gays in the military, the Contract with America, etc. - turnout FAR exceeded expectations. Thus, some GOP wins in close races which normally would have been losses - and a GOP takeover of Congress.

With that said, people and voting districts usually follow rather consistent voting patterns. If 63% of voters in a particular district turned out and voted in the 2000 presidential election year, you can pretty much assume that 63% will turn out again in the 2004 presidential election.

Again, you'll have to judge your district on its own merits and current political environment. A heated local race or ballot initiative has the potential of driving turnout up or down. And if a district has grown or shrunk significantly in population since 2000 you'll need to take that into consideration as well. Still, most districts' voting patterns will pretty much stay the same.

In short, if you want to know how a district will vote in the future, look to see how it voted in the past. People are creatures of habit ... and they only change their habits in unusual circumstances.

Lastly, before getting down to the nitty-gritty, you need to make sure you are comparing apples to apples when looking at historical voting patterns. Generally speaking, voter turnout is higher in presidential election years than it is in non-presidential election years. A significant number of voters ONLY vote in presidential elections.

So in estimating how many votes you'll need to win your race, make sure you are comparing voting statistics for a similar race in similar election cycle. For example, since 2004 is a presidential election year, you'll want to look at what your district did in 2000 - the last presidential election year. If you want to determine how many votes you'll need for a race in 2006, you'll want to look at election results for 2002, etc.

If you're looking at a congressional race for 2004, you probably won't get an accurate idea of the number of votes you'll need if you look at what happened in that race in 2002 - since voter turnout in 2002 will more likely mirror what was done in 1998. Got it?

OK. In a nutshell, here is the information you'll need to do your calculations. These figures should be readily available from your county elections department or registrar of voters...

1. The total number of people who were registered to vote in the district on election day of your similar race.
2. The current number of people registered to vote in your district.
3. The total number of people who actually voted (turn-out) in the previous election you're comparing. (Note: Due to "drop off" ... people only voting in

top-of-the-ticket races ... the combined number of people voting in your targeted race could actually be lower than the grand total who voted).

4. The total number of people who voted for the Republican candidate in your targeted race. (This is assuming you are a Republican candidate. If you're a Democrat, look at the Democrat totals.)

That's it for now - but later we're going to determine exactly how many votes you need out of EVERY PRECINCT, so while you're at the elections department, find out how many people voted for the Republican candidate in your similar race for that year broken down by precinct. Thus, for a 2004 race, just complete a form/spreadsheet like so...

2000 total # of registered voters on election day _____
2000 total # of votes cast in the district (turnout) _____
2000 total # of votes cast for the GOP candidate _____
2004 total # of registered voters currently in the district _____

Total votes cast for GOP candidate in 2000 for Precinct #1 _____
Total votes cast for GOP candidate in 2000 for Precinct #2 _____
Total votes cast for GOP candidate in 2000 for Precinct #3 _____
Total votes cast for GOP candidate in 2000 for Precinct #4 _____
etc...

Now, unless you're the "Rain Man," you'll need a calculator.

For the purpose of demonstration, let's plug in some numbers from an actual county commission race out in Nevada:

2000 total # of registered voters on Election Day: 59,279
2000 total # of votes cast in the district (turnout): 31,990
2000 total # of votes cast for the GOP candidate: 10,827
2004 total # of registered voters in the district: 68,631

Total votes cast for GOP candidate in 2000 for Precinct #1: 55

Total votes cast for GOP candidate in 2000 for Precinct #2: 22

Total votes cast for GOP candidate in 2000 for Precinct #3: 137

Total votes cast for GOP candidate in 2000 for Precinct #4: 285

Total votes cast for GOP candidate in 2000 for Precinct #5: 207

There were a lot more precincts in this particular race, but just looking at the first five will give you the idea.

Now the first thing you need to do is determine what the voter turnout percentage was in 2000. This is simple division. Just take the 2000 number of votes cast in the district (31,990) and divide it by the total number of people who were registered to vote in that district in that year (59,279).

Your rounded-off voter turnout percentage in 2000, then, was: 54%

Now, if the turnout percentage in your district in 2000 was 54%, you can pretty safely assume that the turnout percentage in 2004 will also be pretty close to 54%. To be thorough though, you should work your numbers based on higher and lower turnout estimates to take into consideration any special circumstances. But all things being equal, we're going to assume a 54% turnout for your district's race in 2004.

Therefore, to estimate how many people you can expect to go to the polls in 2004, you simply multiply the current number of registered voters (which increased in this case significantly) in your district - 68,631 - by the estimated turnout percentage - 54%.

68,631

x .54

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That means the estimated total number of voters who will likely be voting in your district in 2004 is: 37,061.

How many of those votes do you need to win? 50 percent plus one.

But to give yourself a little wiggle room to account for slight variations, I always set my vote goal at getting 52 percent of the vote. If I shoot for 52 percent, and only get 50.7 percent - I still win!

So to determine your overall, district-wide vote goal for 2004, take the estimated total number of people expected to vote in your district (37,061) and multiply it by 52%.

$$\begin{array}{r} 37,061 \\ \times .52 \\ \hline ? \end{array}$$

That means your Vote Goal is: 19,272.

Now, let me ask you again.

If a donor asks how many votes it's going to take to win, which is going to be the more impressive answer?

Around 20,000 ... or, 19,272

Yeah, you betcha!

Of course, knowing how many votes you're gonna NEED to win isn't the same thing as being able to actually GET them or knowing HOW to get them.

In fact, the figures for this county commission race are terrible - although high population growth in the district is a mitigating circumstance which calls for closer

scrutiny. But those are entirely different topics on district evaluation and strategy. First have to know what your target is before you can start shooting at it.

Now, the last thing you want to do in establishing your Vote Goals is determine exactly how many votes you'll need to get out of each PRECINCT in your district. Again, we're going to rely on the historical vote results from your similar race in 2000.

First, make a list of every precinct in your district. Next to each precinct, record the number of votes the Republican candidate received in that race in 2000.

Once that research has been completed and recorded, it's time to whip out the ol' calculator again. (Spreadsheet technology, if you or someone in your campaign knows how to use it, really makes this a snap!)

Take the total number of votes the 2000 GOP candidate received in each precinct and divide it into the total district-wide vote total the GOP candidate received. This will give you the percent of the GOP vote that came out of each precinct. You'll want to round this number out to at least four digits.

Using the figures for our example, the GOP candidate in 2000 received 55 votes in Precinct #1 - out of a total of 10,827. If you divide 55 into 10,827 you get: 0.005079892.

We round that off to .0051. That figure represents the percentage of the total GOP vote you can expect to get from that precinct in 2004.

So, to determine how many votes you'll need out of Precinct #1 to reach your overall Vote Goal, you simply multiply your total Vote Goal (19,272) by the precinct percent (.0051).

19,272
x .0051

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That means your vote goal for Precinct #1 in 2004, then, is: 98

Now go through every precinct and determine your vote goal for each.

In Precinct #4, for example, the number of votes the GOP candidate got in 2000 was 285. That means the percentage of votes that came out of Precinct #4 in 2000 was .0263 (285 divided by 10,827). Multiply that (.0263) by the projected 2004 total Vote Goal (19,272) and your vote goal for Precinct #4 is: 507.

As valuable as this information is for planning and strategic purposes, it is equally valuable to your efforts to recruit volunteers.

For most campaigns, volunteers are simply told to go out and get votes - with no rhyme or reason to the plan. Knowing that the campaign needs 19,272 votes at least gives them something to hang their hats on - but that's still a pretty good-sized sandwich to be biting into ... especially for an unpaid, inexperienced volunteer.

But suppose you tell your volunteer in Precinct #4 that their job is to get just 507 votes for you - rather than, "as many of the 19,272 you can come up with." Now, that's a doable and less intimidating figure to work with!

From a volunteer's standpoint, if they're told they have six months to come up with 19,272 votes, they're going to feel terribly overwhelmed ... maybe to the point of quitting.

But having six months to get just 507 votes ... that's something they'll feel comfortable with. And that makes it a WHOLE lot easier to recruit precinct chairmen and other volunteers.

Back to the figures.

Of course, now that you know what you're shooting for, you can take a look to see what your chances are.

For example, if your Vote Goal is 19,272 - and no Republican candidate ... from President, to Governor to dog catcher ... has ever been able to achieve that number in the past couple of elections, then the odds of you obtaining that number is very, very small indeed.

Of course, there's always the exception that proves the rule ... but I wouldn't bet the farm on it.

You can also tear these numbers apart and begin to develop a strategy: While looking at what other GOP candidates have historically done in each precinct. For example, you might determine that you can't reach the vote goal for, say, Precinct #1 - but you could make up the difference in Precinct #4.

Lastly, you should run these numbers based on a variety of scenarios. What if the turnout is 5% lower than normal? What are your vote goals then? What if turnout is 5% higher? How about 3% higher; or 7% lower? Whatever the scenario you come up with, you can now estimate what your Vote Goal is going to be.

Once your Vote Goals have been set, it's time to go out and actually get them. This is the Voter ID aspect of a campaign, and the concept is simple...

Let's say there are 2,000 registered voters in Precinct #4. Your Vote Goal in this precinct is 507. So what you want to do is make a list every one of those 2,000 voters. Using today's computer and database technology, this is a pretty simple task.

When you start your campaign, every one of those 2,000 voters is an "undecided" voter. But as you begin walking door-to-door and making calls from your phone bank, more and more of those undecided voters are going to identify themselves.

Every time you or a volunteer talks with a voter who says he or she is definitely voting for you, you put them down in the “For” column. Every time you or a volunteer talks with a voter that says he or she is definitely voting against you, you put them down in the “Against” column.

Not exactly rocket science, is it? But you’d be amazed at how few campaigns do this on a day-to-day basis. They campaign the entire election season in the dark (or rely on unreliable - and expensive - polls).

Now, on election day, your campaign should have a tally of all the people who are “For” you and “Against” you. If the number of people who are “For” you exceeds your Vote Goal for that precinct ... as well as the district at large ... you’ll know before the polls even open whether you’re going to win or lose.

That is...

If you’ve accurately estimated the voter turnout...

And if all the people who said they were definitely for you actually show up at the polls.

Again, get-out-the-vote is another topic for another day. But I hope you can see how determining your Vote Goal is the first, most-important step in developing your campaign plan and strategy. Everything else - especially fundraising - falls into place once you draw your bulls eye.