



## **CHAPTER IV:**

# *Making the Decision to Run*

*“The future will not belong to those who are cynical or those who stand on the sidelines.  
The future will belong to those who have passion and are willing to work hard  
to make our country better.”*

*The Honorable Paul Wellstone*

If you have a passion for economic and social justice and the skills to contribute to the fight, the progressive movement needs you on the front lines today to ensure positive change for tomorrow.

Running for political office is a significant undertaking – one that requires a level of commitment only outweighed by the benefits of helping to shape policies in your community, your state and your country. And while choosing a career in public service is an honorable decision, it is not one to be made without a careful assessment of your skills, your personal circumstances and the political environment in which you will run.

In this chapter, we will identify the questions you should answer and groundwork you should lay before announcing your candidacy, including performing an assessment of yourself and the political environment in which you will run; gaining an understanding of the candidate requirements and deadlines on the horizon and conducting initial research on you, your opponent and the issues expected to arise in the campaign.

## **I. SELF-ASSESSMENT**

As you prepare to undertake a campaign, you should begin by conducting a complete self-assessment and carefully consider the following factors:

### **A. Why do you want to run?**

Is there a local issue that has spurred you to action? Are you concerned about the direction of the country? Understanding your own motivations will help you decide if pursuing a political career is right for you and will also help define your candidacy and your message as your campaign gets underway.

**B. What experience do you bring to the table?**

Is it 10 years running a small business that qualifies you to lead, or your experience raising a family and making ends meet? What experience do you have that will translate to a career in public service? Are you seeking the office – be it school board, city council or the state legislature – that is both the most appropriate political opportunity and the most relevant to your abilities and ideological concerns? Being able to articulate your qualifications is the first step in developing a clear and compelling message and making your candidacy relevant to voters.

**C. What are your strengths and weaknesses?**

Do you love raising money, but fear campaigning door to door? Do you have a commitment to social justice, but lack a full understanding of the issues? Do you have a compelling message, but dread speaking in public? Examine and assess the positives and negatives of your candidacy and make decisions early that will help capitalize on your strengths and compensate for, or help you overcome, your weaknesses.

**D. Are you prepared?**

A thoughtful evaluation of your personal circumstances should help you determine if the decision – and the timing – are right for you. Consider the following:

- ◆ Does your family support your decision to run?
- ◆ Are you willing to ask friends and family for help and money?
- ◆ Are you able to take time off from work?
- ◆ Are you on solid financial footing?
- ◆ Are you in good physical health?
- ◆ Do you have a realistic understanding of what it will take to win and are you willing to make the necessary commitment?

**E. Do your research!**

Once you've made the decision to run, you should begin by conducting a thorough review of your own background. The importance of revisiting all aspects of your school, employment, business, financial, personal and

public life cannot be overstated. You and your closest advisors must have a grasp on the facts in order to capitalize on your strengths and experience and/or to be prepared should information concerning your history become an issue during the campaign. Questions you should ask include, but are not limited to, the following:

**1. School**

- ◆ Did you drop out of high school or college, or have you defaulted on any student loans?
- ◆ In what campus organizations were you involved?
- ◆ Did you publish any papers or deliver any speeches expressing bold or controversial opinions?
- ◆ Did you hold any leadership positions of note, or organize for positive change on campus?

**2. Business/Employment**

- ◆ Have you ever been fired, or do you have disgruntled business associates who could raise issues?
- ◆ Are there business deals you have been involved with that may raise questions?
- ◆ As an employer, did you pay all applicable employment taxes?
- ◆ As a business owner, did you operate a business free from discrimination, harassment and questionable business practices?
- ◆ As a business owner, did you provide exceptional opportunities for your employees, such as tuition assistance or child care?
- ◆ What are your greatest professional achievements and how can that experience translate to your role as a public servant?

### **3. Financial**

- ◆ Are you in default on any loans?
- ◆ Have you always paid your income taxes in full and on time?
- ◆ Do you have a good credit rating?
- ◆ Have you made all applicable child support and alimony payments?
- ◆ In what ways have you demonstrated solid financial judgment?
- ◆ To what civic, community, or political organizations have you made financial contributions?

### **4. Personal**

- ◆ Have you, your partner or your children ever been arrested?
- ◆ Have you gone to court over matters that are now a matter of public record?
- ◆ Are there personal, family or marital issues that could become fodder for the campaign?
- ◆ Have you done volunteer work in your community?
- ◆ What are your greatest personal attributes?

### **5. Public**

- ◆ Have you made public statements that can be used for or against you?
- ◆ Are there newspaper articles about you or members of your family?

- ◆ Have you taken public stands on issues that may be considered bold or controversial?
- ◆ Have you voted consistently in recent elections?
- ◆ Do you have a voting record as an elected official, and if so, does it contain red flags or inconsistencies?
- ◆ To which organizations have you had official or unofficial ties and which will invest resources to ensure your election or defeat?
- ◆ What public figures do you know or have relationships with?

Don't just focus on the negative, but don't ignore it either. While a textured personal history doesn't necessarily mean you shouldn't seek public office, it does mean you need to be fully prepared should issues about your background come to light. Often the best defense is a good offense – a strategy that is not possible if you and your advisors are not aware of the facts.

## **II. POLITICAL LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT**

Just as important as an assessment of your personal viability as a candidate is a complete review of the political environment in which your campaign will be run. Accurately reviewing the landscape will help you make an informed decision, convince others you are up to the task and ultimately determine the strategy that will guide your campaign.

**A. Your District**

The factors you should investigate and consider are listed below; in most cases, the state Party, legislative Caucus and/or Campaign Committee will provide this information to you upon request.

- ◆ What is the Democratic performance?
- ◆ How many people are registered to vote? What is their partisan split?
- ◆ What was the voter turnout percentage in the last Presidential and non-Presidential elections?
- ◆ How many votes did the winner receive in the last like campaign and what was his/her margin of victory?
- ◆ How much was spent by each candidate in the last like election?

**B. General Political Landscape**

Your campaign will be part of a larger political environment among activists, volunteers, donors and voters in your district. Understanding the context in which your race will be run will help you realistically design your strategy and budget your time and resources. In preparation for the campaign, you should assess the following:

- ◆ What elections and initiatives will also appear on the ballot?
- ◆ Do you expect your district to be a focus of intense activity by other candidates?
- ◆ How do you expect top-of the-ticket organizing to impact turnout?
- ◆ Do you run as a slate with others in your district, and if so, can you combine efforts in any way?
- ◆ What organizations and political leaders do you expect to line up in support of and in opposition to your campaign?

- ◆ Are there overriding national concerns that will impact your race, or that have particular relevance to your district?
- ◆ What resources can you expect from your state party or caucus?

### **III. RESEARCH ON REQUIREMENTS, RULES AND DEADLINES**

You must follow certain state-imposed guidelines in order to file as a candidate and get a spot on the ballot; you must also adhere to legal regulations throughout the course of your campaign in order to stay in compliance with the law. You should answer – and add to your plan and timeline – the following:

- ◆ How many signatures do you need to get on the ballot? How many signatures should you obtain in order to avoid problems with eligibility or a potential ballot access challenge by your opponent?
- ◆ Is there a fee to file?
- ◆ When is the candidate filing deadline?
- ◆ When is the primary election?
- ◆ Under what circumstances might there be a runoff election?
- ◆ What requirements must you meet before you can begin soliciting contributions?
- ◆ When are you required to file financial disclosure reports and what expenses and contributions need to be included?
- ◆ By what date must you name a campaign treasurer and/or established an official candidate committee?
- ◆ What are the contribution limits in your race?
- ◆ What disclaimer language needs to be included on your campaign literature?

#### IV. INITIAL OPPOSITION AND ISSUE RESEARCH

Just as you should conduct a thorough examination of your own personal and professional background and the local political landscape, you or your staff should begin the process of extensively researching your opponent(s). Your research need not be entirely complete in the first stage of your campaign, but getting a grasp on his or her weaknesses, bad votes and controversial statements and issue positions early will help you shape your message and devise your strategy moving forward.

You should also have a clear understanding of what issues are likely to be raised in the campaign, identify quality resources and independent organizations that can help you and begin to develop succinct issue positions. You should begin to develop a research book that lays out, in “Q and A” format, the pertinent issues in the race and your succinct answers. Questions to ask yourself as you begin are as follows:

- ◆ What are the issues over which you will have actual jurisdiction if elected?
- ◆ What, if any, is your particular expertise in dealing with these matters and what are your positions and proposed solutions?
- ◆ What other state or local issues are likely to come up in the race? Are there controversial issues facing the current city council or state legislature on which you will be expected to comment or take an official position?
- ◆ On what national issues can you expect to have an impact and what are your positions and talking points on those issues?
- ◆ Are there talking points or issue briefs available from local or national organizations and/or is there polling data available from the state party or your legislative caucus that can help shape your message?
- ◆ What are your opponent’s positions on the key issues? Where are your most significant contrasts with your opponent? How can you frame the issues in a way that maximizes your strengths while highlighting your opponent’s weaknesses?

## **V. LAYING THE GROUNDWORK**

### **A. Form Your Kitchen Cabinet**

Outside of your family, who are the people you trust to give you sound political guidance? Who can help you raise money? Form a committee of those individuals from whom you can seek trusted and sound advice, guidance and support and meet with them regularly as you begin your campaign.

### **B. Begin Building Lists**

High quality lists will be the backbone of your political campaign. You can't raise money, disseminate your message or turn out your vote without them – so start by gathering and compiling lists early. Begin with your holiday card list and add everyone in your address book and in your life's history. Current and former bosses, employees, teachers, students, family, friends, friends of family, neighbors, co-workers and acquaintances should all be asked to contribute to or volunteer for your campaign. Once you hire staff, list building should be a top priority.

### **C. Take Advantage of Candidate Training Opportunities**

Take advantage of the campaign training offered to you by Progressive Majority, your state party and other political organizations in your state and nationally. Learn the basics early, as time will become scarce as your campaign heats up.

## **VI. PLAN, PLAN, PLAN**

Now it's time for the important step of all: Writing your campaign plan. Your plan serves as your road map; you cannot win without one – and if it isn't in writing, it doesn't exist. In the next chapter, we will detail the elements of a plan and help set you on your way to devising your own winning strategy.