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Media tips for the next recall

Now that California's electorate has rewarded a dramatic recall effort, some sequels are likely elsewhere in the near future. It's a good bet that political operatives in many states will try to learn from this fall's Golden State extravaganza.

Media strategists were key to the recall drive that ended in triumph for Arnold Schwarzenegger's savvy corporate backers. So, as a public service, here are some tips for any partisans who want a shot at spinning their way into recall history:

- * Do your best to capitalize on smoldering resentments. Don't bother to illuminate much about the actual underlying causes of social discontent. Try to use citizen outrage as bait to attract the support of talk-show hosts, pundits, ambitious politicians and well-heeled contributors.

Spark plugs for the California recall were happy to vilify Gray Davis as a crafty charlatan and/or incompetent cold fish. The governor made such caricatures easy; he raked in lots of sizeable checks from vested interests and engaged in budgetary sleight of hand. But instead of confronting his deference to energy firms that functioned as rip-off artists — or denouncing his refusal to back tax hikes for large corporations and wealthy individuals — the recall's conservative boosters preferred to blame Davis for too much spending and not enough solicitude to big business.

- * Try to throw a manipulative harness on sincere concerns among voters. Keep the media messages simple and simplistic. In California, an anti-tax drumbeat — with lots of media reverb — went a long way toward drowning out voices that called for a major shift to progressive taxation. Little news coverage and scant paid advertising explained that such a shift could mean higher taxes for the rich and large companies but lower taxes for everyone else.

- * If a luminary on the campaign team goes "off message" with a genuinely sensible observation, put a sock in it, pronto. Early in the short campaign, a much-ballyhooed economic adviser for Schwarzenegger made improperly logical comments. Warren Buffett pointed out that Proposition 13, California's venerable property-tax limitation

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law, "doesn't make sense." The fabled financier noted that he was paying \$2,264 for a year's worth of property taxes on a Southern California home valued at \$4 million. But a press secretary for the actor-turned-politician rushed to proclaim that "Mr. Buffett doesn't speak for Mr. Schwarzenegger" and hastened to add that the candidate "has supported Prop. 13 for 25 years."

* Do your best to generate a steady stream of media messages that obscure complexities of underlying power relations while providing plenty of buzz phrases and images that mostly serve as triggers for pre-existing assumptions. Sound-bite platitudes and Schwarzenegger's muscle-bound celeb candidacy were well-suited to what passed for news on television, where even "in depth" stories were usually the word-length equivalent of a few short paragraphs. While newspapers provided some notably serious reporting, for the most part the TV news zone was predictably agog with glitz and sizzle.

* Personalize to dodge basic issues. In California, for well over a century, oligopolies of land holdings have throttled the state. Yet when recall promoters claimed to be speaking truth about power, they zeroed in on the corporate front man in the governor's office rather than confront (or even acknowledge) the dominance of real estate interests: from urban concrete labyrinths and suburban developments to the vast tracts of rural acreage owned by multi-multimillionaires and agribusiness.

* Cloak a candidate eager to serve elites in the garb of a populist champion. Schwarzenegger's plain-speaking cliches supplied media window dressing for an economic mind-set amounting to a dream come true for upper-class combatants in the class wars.

* Whenever possible, conflate entertainment fantasies with social realities, even while claiming to always know the difference. After decades as a media creature of entertainment, this fall Arnold Schwarzenegger easily made the transition to being a media creature of politics. His victory will encourage other mind-numbing celebrities to further blur the distinctions between arrogant stories and rational government policies. ■

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