

Silly Season

IT MAY NOT LITERALLY BE LIKE PULLING TEETH, but it's close.

This year, for the second time, *Contingencies* decided to open its pages to the two major presidential candidates and allow them to present their positions on issues of particular interest to actuaries.

Last time, in 2000, the topic was Social Security. But since all Social Security's problems have now been solved (just kidding), this time we decided to tackle health care.

Now, *Contingencies* is a fine magazine. Academy members and even non-actuaries say kind things about it. It has actually won some awards. But it's not *Time* or *Newsweek*. So when some harried campaign staffer is told that a guy from *Contingencies* magazine is on the line, the not unreasonable response is: "Who?"

I've never actually been to a presidential candidate's headquarters, but it's not hard to imagine what it must be like. It hasn't been there very long, for one thing; a couple months at most. Everything about it is temporary—the office space leased, the phones and furniture rented, the staff in constant flux. Clear lines of demarcation probably haven't had a chance to evolve yet.

In other words, chaos.

So one makes adjustments. One tries to make it easy. Sure, actuaries are as important as anybody else in the electorate, but we have to be realistic. No requests for one-on-one interviews or for an original bylined policy piece by the candidate, or even a high-level staffer. Rather, something already prepared, something off the shelf and vetted. It wouldn't make the 6 o'clock news, but it would carry the candidates' bylines. My first several requests disappear like Pioneer 10 into the void. But I'm early (a lesson learned from last time). I have time to be persistent. And finally, I begin to pick up signals. First from the Kerry camp, then from Bush.

I've been heard; there is someone out there after all.

Over the next several weeks, the signals wax and wane. They bounce around, change identities, disappear, reappear.

But I track them diligently, stating my case each time on the assumption that this is probably the first time whoever it is has ever heard of me. Over and over. Always listening for signs of intelligent life.

And then, one morning, a phone call from the Bush campaign. (Each time it happens always seems like a minor miracle.) This time, a young woman tells me that the Bush folks will be releasing a memo on health care in the next day or so and she'll forward it to me as soon as it's released.

I thank her profusely, and immediately call my last contact at Kerry HQ to tell them they've lost the lead. I leave a phone message; it's returned by someone else entirely.

"Have the Bush people actually sent you anything yet?" he asks. He sounds skeptical. Jaded, even.

"No," I say, "but they promised to in the next couple days."

"Sure they did," he says. "Happens all the time. And frankly, we're tired of being the only ones who end up complying with some of these requests. Basically, we're not interested unless you really do get something from Bush."

What about the high road? I suggest, trying not to sound desperate. What about setting an example?

"Call us if it happens," he says.

Two days later, it happens: a very brief policy memo that's well short of what I'd requested. And sure, it also turns up simultaneously on the Bush for President website, so it's hardly an exclusive. But it's better than nothing.

I relay the news to the Kerry camp and a week later receive their response. So now I have both pieces and the hard part is over.

I'm glad this only happens every four years.



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