

## The Boston Tea Party On A Budget

My wife Cathy and I founded Citizens for Reasonable And Fair Taxes in 2002 to organize opposition to the school referenda on the ballot in 2003. We didn't want to spend a lot of money or time, but felt determined that these tax proposals were counter to the public interest and must be defeated. With a budget of less than \$250, we triumphed over the entrenched interests that outspent us roughly 100-to-1. This success was repeated in March 2004 with an even larger margin of victory: 57-43.

Spreading information is easy with a bottomless checkbook. The real trick is to produce results with minimal funds, available to middle-class Americans. Our group has been successful at this, and at teaching others to do the same in their communities. I'd like to share some of the strategies and pitfalls of these efforts.

### Step 1 – Prepare yourself!

“The price of Liberty is eternal vigilance” – Thomas Jefferson

Any successful movement needs three things: means, motive, and opportunity. Distasteful as higher taxes are to many, there is always someone on the receiving end of this money. Some of these beneficiaries, such as the teachers unions, have enormous political power and absolutely no reason not to try to raise your taxes. There is *never* a shortage of opportunity!

Now to motive; why should one organize opposition to tax increases? Because, simply put, this is a battle that **can** be won. The satisfaction of thwarting harmful tax increases goes far beyond the dollars you save today. Defeating school tax increases puts a chink in the armor of the special interests that champion the status quo. Before the broad-based school reforms we so desperately need can be made, the teachers unions must be defeated.

Understanding this is key to finding the energy to fight. But as in any struggle, it's important to know what you're up against. Be warned. Your enemy is not an abstract intellectual group willing to politely make its case in the court of public opinion. No, your enemy is a highly organized group with an almost limitless supply of cash, an enemy that believes it deserves anything it asks for, and that anybody who stands in its way must be stopped by any means possible. While you are fighting for the economic freedom of your community, your enemy is fighting to save its very existence as a tax parasite.

For these and other reasons, your vocal opposition will come to hate you, and this can be used to your advantage. By putting your name on letters and commentary opposing a tax increase, you will become the target of a highly organized smear campaign. I cannot emphasize this point enough; **do not respond to personal smear attacks!** The biggest mistake one could make is to adopt a similar tactic; this sickens much of the population, producing voter apathy. By remaining objective and focused, you maintain that you have a valid case for opposing the new tax. This contrasts those who would attempt to discredit you through personal attacks.

I have learned that as your opponents become angrier, they make more mistakes. They are terrified that you might succeed in making your point. Personal assaults are their means of distraction. Stay the course. You'll get your point across, and your opponent's credibility will sink.

## **Step 2 – Prepare your case**

So you've got what it takes to withstand the slings and arrows coming your way, what next? This is an exercise in persuasion, so you need a persuasive case to oppose a tax increase. The good news is, there is one reason to oppose the increase that nobody can argue: it will cost the taxpayers money. Sounds simple, but it makes an effective point, *the burden of proof rests solely with the tax proponents*. There is already one sound reason to vote "no"; it saves you money. You start with a 1-0 lead.

There is little point in detailing some of the points you may choose to make. They vary by community and circumstance. What **is** important is that the public discourse remains focused on relevant factual information. In most cases, your opponents know that theirs is a losing battle, so they will try to drive the dialogue towards vague truisms and emotional appeals.

Trite as it sounds, being "in the right" is the best weapon in a debate. If you allow the discussions to become dominated by emotionalism and "collective truths", you will deprive yourself of your greatest advantage. The facts are on your side – use them!

## **Step 3 – Prepare your friends**

Ask people to donate money to the cause, and you'll get little cooperation. But ask those same people to donate their time and energy and you'll be amazed at the outpouring of support. Do not look upon such selective support with disdain. After all, an obsession with funding is the very evil your group seeks to dismantle. Lead by example!

Cathy and I established early in CRAFT that we would neither solicit nor accept monetary aid. Yes, this means that virtually all of CRAFT's funding comes from our own pocket, so we have a direct personal incentive to run a tight ship.

Once you form a tax increase opposition group, you'll find more public support than you ever imagined. This groundswell might take you by surprise (Cathy and I were amazed at how many people wanted to help). In school districts we've seen a consistent pattern where people are intimidated into silence. Parents feel especially vulnerable because of their children. We've worked with many parents who requested anonymity in fear of retaliation.

This groundswell will take the pro-tax group by surprise also. In Harvard, many tax supporters were genuinely unaware that many of their neighbors were keeping mum thanks to their intimidation culture. A side effect of this is that the "establishment" will frequently underestimate your influence.

In many communities, school funding has been a one-sided issue. When a new group rises to oppose the “establishment”, many in the community will jump on the chance to join the fight. Some will need to retain anonymity, others will not. Make sure every supporter can contribute; this sense of participation works wonders for voter turnout on that important date. Never consider any level of contribution as “small” or “inadequate”; anything is better than apathy. In the April 2003 referendum vote, Harvard stood out as having record turnout as other communities showed minimal voter interest.

#### **Step 4 – Dump the tea!**

With a small army of motivated volunteers and a clear message, the time has come to act. With a tight budget, a few low-cost/no-cost methods work best.

**4a Website** – Most people with Internet access have web storage that can be used to create a webpage. Since this area already exists, it is truly a “free” resource. You needn’t be an expert at web design. The CRAFT website was the first webpage I’d ever made. Sure, it looked it, but content (over format) is more important than many realize. Even if your site is rather ugly, it can link to the myriad semi-professional websites with important information. Your group might also be fortunate enough to have a skilled web designer. Be sure your website has an email account and maintain an email list for regular updates.

At CRAFT, our original web address was cryptic and caused difficulty for the less internet-savvy members of the community. To fix this we registered a domain, [www.noreferendum.org](http://www.noreferendum.org) and pointed it to our still-free web storage. This registration costs us about \$7 per year.

**4b Newspaper** – Most papers have a section where residents can write about almost anything. There are typically limits as to length and frequency, but they are not overly restrictive. This is an excellent way to make your group known, and it costs nothing. If you have a website, be sure to mention it. Don’t rely on Internet search engines to get people to your website.

While it is important to ask your outspoken members to write their own letters, resist the temptation to “ghost write”. Like the smear campaigns mentioned earlier, ghost writing letters to the paper is a common tactic of pro-tax groups. Fortunately, they don’t usually do a very good job of hiding this. In 2003, CRAFT made a minor faux pas that the pro-tax group tried to exploit. The result was three sequential letters to the editor that were virtually identical. It backfired; the public largely recognized this as an orchestrated campaign.

**4c Pamphlets** – This not-so-free mechanism costs money, but is well worth it. The best pamphlets have verifiable facts that support your opposition to the tax increase. Non-factual pamphlets are usually a bad idea; people don’t want to be told what to think or how to feel. By presenting supporting facts, you persuade in a manner that is not easily countered by the pro-tax groups.

Distribution is best done manually, mail is simply too expensive. In Harvard, we had numerous people willing to distribute various amounts of literature. To keep costs down, make small print runs (~200) based on commitments from people to distribute. A few businesses might be willing to sponsor your pamphlet, but don’t count on it. Most businesses know better than to get in the middle of the debate, but not all. Some feel its

“safe” to support the school taxes. For these businesses, its useful to let them understand that they risk alienating a large segment of the population. We’ve seen a decline in businesses openly supporting the school on tax issues simply because of the potential business backlash.

Be sure people distributing your literature avoid mailboxes, as this is a criminal offense. Putting pamphlets on cars, while perhaps legal, is also in poor taste. We’ve had some luck handing pamphlets to commuters as they board trains and busses.

**4d Public Meetings** – The public meeting is the single most effective technique to “legitimize” your movement. Pro-tax groups hold public and semi-public meetings almost without fail. These meetings give an “official” sense to the pro-tax group, even though the Election Interference Act prohibits direct involvement in a tax campaign by public entities. There is nothing preventing your tax opposition group from using this forum as well.

Such meetings can usually be carried out at little or no cost. Public libraries, churches, supportive businesses, and even public schools can provide no-cost facilities for these meetings. Early in CRAFT’s campaign, one reporter speaking to Cathy mentioned an upcoming pro-referendum meeting and asked if our group would be holding any meetings. On notice of only a few hours, we arranged a meeting and secured a location and time. We called the reporter back with this information so the meeting would receive (free) timely notification in the newspaper. We borrowed my employer’s projector, made some PowerPoint presentations, and held our first public meeting.

From this point forward, friend and foe alike considered CRAFT a “player” on school finance issues.

What should the meeting be like? First of all, take a look at a typical school board or pro-tax meeting and you’ll learn much about what **not** to have in your meeting. Here are a few dos and don’ts:

#### **DO**

- Hold the meeting on a non-Friday weeknight, starting between 6:00pm and 7:30pm.
- Schedule 2-5 well-prepared speakers for no more than 90 minutes.
- Allow time at the end for public input.
- Address a limited number of issues. FOCUS!
- Provide accurate supporting facts for your cause.
- Debunk misinformation used by the pro-tax camp.
- Be sure to invite members of the press.
- Try to make entire audience feel welcome and comfortable.

#### **DON’T**

- Start late. This is a common faux pas of the “establishment”. Set yourself apart.
- Let any speaker ramble or greatly surpass their time allotment.
- Use tables or other “noisy” slides in your presentation.
- Make apologies of any sort for your position (ex. “We’re not anti-education”)

- Allow personal topics into the discussions.
- Think your meeting is about you or your friends. Its about the community and your information.
- Cede control of the meeting to the opposition. They have plenty of chances to hold meetings.
- Hold more than one meeting per community per vote without good reason.

**4e Telephone** – I can't say I recommend this approach, but will include it since it can be "free" if you have an unlimited calling plan. The recent federal do-not-call list does NOT apply to political calls, so this is not an issue of concern. We tried it in Harvard. It was slow, took great effort, and didn't seem to produce results. Unsolicited calls, even if legal, don't sit well with many, so use at your own risk. Calling was useful in gauging the public sentiment.