“I dabbled in witchcraft” or how to conduct opposition research

Researching your opponent, opposition research, or the candidate that you’re working with, candidate research, is mission critical. Too many local, and even higher profile races, don’t bother with opposition research and it comes back to haunt them later.

Opposition research isn’t just about digging up dirt on the other candidate, although the possibility of finding a smoking gun that ends a campaign before it even starts is exciting, but it is also the foundation for the campaign message and helps build coalitions.

Candidate timeline

Start your candidate or opposition research by putting together a timeline for the candidate. In this instance, let’s say we are working for the 2011 Earl Ray Tomblin for Governor campaign in West Virginia and we are conducting some candidate research.

A Google search for the candidates name in quotes on Google produces the Governor’s official website, the campaign website, and his Wikipedia page to name a few. In addition, the Wikipedia page has a number of great resources including the Project Vote Smart page. With results like this, it is simple to put together a timeline for the candidate:

- Born March 15, 1952
- Son of Freda M. (née Jarrell) and Earl Tomblin, a former Logan County Sheriff
• Bachelor of Science from West Virginia University, member of Kappa Alpha Order
• Master’s in business administration from Marshall University
• Schoolteacher, unknown school and time
• Businessman, unknown business and time
• West Virginia House of Delegates 1974-1980
• Lieutenant Governor 2000-2010
• Acting Governor of West Virginia 2010-present

Organizations:
• Member, Kappa Alpha
• Chair/Member, National Conference of State Governments, Executive Committee
• Member, Outstanding Young Men in America
• Member, Southern Legislative Conference Executive Committee
• Member, State Legislative Leaders Foundation Board of Directors

Caucuses/Non-Legislative Committees:
• Chair, Council of State Governments, 2004-2005
• Chair, West Virginia Committee, 2000
• Chair, Southern Legislative Conference, 1999
• Member, National Board of Directors, Senate President’s Forum
• Chair, West Virginia Senate Commission on Special Investigations
• Former Member, Logan County Development Authority

While there is a lot of great information here, there is a lot of work to be done to fill in the gaps. While Project Vote Smart had lists of the organizations Tomblin is a part of, you will need to find out when Tomblin became affiliated with these organizations. This way, if there is something remarkable to detestable that happened in these organizations at a certain time you know whether Tomblin was a member at the time. Likewise, there are holes in the timeline with Tomblin’s private life including his marriage, his son, and private employment as a businessman and teacher. This kind of personal information might not seem immediately relevant, but many campaigns have been burned criticizing another candidate for missing a vote when the candidate was at a wedding, funeral, or birth.
What information is available?

Once you have a timeline for your candidate or the opposition, brainstorm all of the public records that are available for each part of the candidate’s life. With a long career in public office in the West Virginia legislature and as a Lieutenant Governor, Tomblin has mountains of open records:

- Votes on the floor and in committee
- Committee and floor attendance
- Public comments at hearings, on the floor, and otherwise
- Ethics statements
- Campaign finance report

But also brainstorm where the open records are for other aspects of the candidate’s life. For example, here are some records to look for when Tomblin was a student:

- School yearbook
- School newspaper
- Thesis, check the school library!
- Organizations and associations

Once you have a complete list of available records, now you need to determine how to get them and if it’s worth spending campaign resources to do so. The first place to start is the internet. If you can get the information online, it’s going to be worth the resources you are using to get it. You should also go online to determine where the records might be available and to glean some information on whether the records will be useful or not.

Lightning fast research

Opposition research is labor intensive. Using some Google ninja tricks, you will slash hours off of your data mining and help determine whether the information that is only available in the field is worth the time and effort.

Voting history

For example, even though information about prime sponsored legislation is available on the West Virginia legislature’s website, it’s still a time consuming
process to go to the website, choose the “bill status” tab, and click “bill status” from the drop down menu only to go through each and every regular and special session while choosing Tomblin as the prime sponsor for dozens of searches from this dashboard:

What if you could do this research in 30 seconds instead? Using Google search operators you can. In this case, first find the website address where you can search for bills by going through the process listed above. Here is the link: http://www.legis.state.wv.us/Bill_Status/

Now, we are going to search that URL for all results that contain “Tomblin:”
W Va. Gov. Tomblin keeping Obama at arms’ length - Yahoo! News
news.yahoo.com/w-v-a-gov-tomblin-keeping-obama-arms-length-18...
May 2, 2012 – From Yahoo! News: Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin joined U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin on Wednesday in the list of top West Virginia Democratic ...

Earl Ray Tomblin, Democratic West Virginia Governor, Says Obama ...
www.huffingtonpost.com/.../earl-ray-tomblin-west-virginia-governor...
May 2, 2012 – CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Count Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin as another West Virginia Democrat who’s keeping his distance from President Barack ...

Tomblin takes the Manchin position on 2012 - POLITICO.com
www.politico.com/.../tomblin-takes-the-manchin-position-on-122274...
May 2, 2012 – After West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin says he’s not sure who he’ll vote for in 2012, the state’s Democratic governor, Earl Ray Tomblin, joins the ...

Earl Ray Tomblin
www.nga.org/cms/home/governors/...list/earl-ray-tomblin.html
Earl Ray Tomblin is West Virginia’s 35th governor. He was born March 15, 1952, in Logan County. A self-employed businessman and former school teacher. ...

Try it yourself: site:http://www.legis.state.wv.us/Bill_Status/ tomblin

HB 4260 Text
www.legis.state.wv.us/bill_status/bills_text.cfm?bills_id=yr ...
Feb 15, 2012 – Bill Status - Search Bills by Date Introduced ... WV Code WV Constitution US Constitution ... SECRETARY OF STATE AND ATTORNEY GENERAL; BOARD ... consistent with current guidelines from the United States Preventive Services Task Force; pap smears, either conventional or liquid-based cytology, ...

SB 406 Text
www.legis.state.wv.us/bill_status/bills_text.cfm?bills_id=yr ...
Feb 16, 2012 – WV Code WV Constitution US Constitution ... provisions for a facility licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture; and providing ...

West Virginia State Senators
www.legis.state.wv.us/Senate/members/senmemview.cfm
State Capitol Complex Charleston, WV 25305. Capitol Phone. (304) 357-7801. Business Phone: (304) 845-2580. E-mail: jeff.kessler@wvsenate.gov, SENATE ...
You have all of the search results pages for bills that Tomblin sponsored back to 1993 in a fraction of the time that it would take to manually pull it off of the search function on the legislature’s website.

‘Site:’ is just the tip of the iceberg. There are a ton of useful advanced Google search operators that will get you the information that you need fast. Check out this [cheat sheet](#) for more information on other search operators.

**Compiling your data**

At this point, most campaigns would ask a volunteer to do some serious data entry, but instead, you’re going to ask your volunteer to knock on doors for the afternoon because getting this information into a spreadsheet using Google Spreadsheet will take less than a half hour.

Go to docs.google.com and sign in, if you don’t already have a Google account you will need to register. Now to go File > New > Spreadsheet.

In cell A1 type `=ImportHtml("the website address where the data is stored", "table", 0)`

In our example, the exact string is:

`=ImportHtml("http://www.legis.state.wv.us/Bill_Status/Bills_Sponsors.cfm?year=2010&sessiontype=2x&btype=bill&senmem=Tomblin%20(Mr.%20President)"; "table"; 0)`

And hit the enter key on your computer keyboard. Tada! You’re spreadsheet will automatically populate with all of the information that was on the search results page:
Repeat this process for each of your results pages and you’ll have a solid database to analyze Tomblin’s prime sponsored bills since 1993. This same process works, more or less in any race where voting information is available online. For other useful formulas in Google docs click here.

The company you keep

Some of the most damaging opposition research comes from identifying and researching known associates. Like other aspects of opposition research, it’s helpful to have local knowledge. This process goes a lot faster if you can pull out the names of known associates with a bad reputation through firsthand knowledge than if you have don’t know them from Adam.

Pull together a list of the Republican candidate’s known associates by going through the candidate’s life timeline and identifying notable people he went to school with as well as colleagues in his businesses:

Bill was a co-founder and executive at North American Drillers, North American Pump and Supply Company and Shaft Drillers International (SDI). He grew North American Drillers from a two-person business in 1984 to become the world-leader in large-diameter shaft drilling for mining and
other industries. Bill sold his share of the business in 2006. Currently, he is a drilling consultant and the principal of Cow Run Energy and Drill Leader.

With a little research, you will be able to amass a decent number of known associates. Some of these connections will have skeletons in their closet. Being in the energy field, has he or his colleagues been involved in any environmental disasters or major safety violations? Does Bill or his close associates have a relationship with anyone in the oil industry with connections to terrorism? There are a host of possibilities. Make sure to keep in mind the politics of, in this instance, the state. There is strong support for fossil fuel energy in West Virginia, so only the most egregious violations would matter to voters. Also, if you don’t know the players that you identify through this investigation, try a quick Google search on the known associate’s name and also to search Google News as a start.

In addition to using the candidate timeline to build a list of known associates:

- Add campaign contributors to the list
- Review connections on social networking sites

If all else fails, generate your own intelligence

There are candidates that are squeaky clean, but others just lack proof of their unethical or immoral behavior that circulates through the rumor mill. While doing this type of work is where opposition research has gotten a reputation for being a dark art, it’s up to each campaign to determine where their boundaries in the opposition research process are. Of course, you should always operate within the bounds of the law.

Here are two ways, video tracking, which is a commonly accepted campaign tactic, and the constituent letter technique, as an example of the kind of techniques that you can use to gather your own information.
Video tracking

Video tracking is a common way that campaigns gather intelligence throughout a campaign. The campaign relies on volunteers or a junior level staffer to record video of the other candidate at public events and, if they can get in, at private events.

While filming, the video tracker should be aware of:

- Inconsistencies in the other candidates’ responses to voters
- Politically incorrect statements
- Inaccuracies and lies

While other people on the research team should be looking at these videos as well for this information, the video tracker should be able to focus the effort.

Campaigns generally hire two flavors of video trackers. The first follows around the candidate and films while other campaigns opt for an aggressive video tracker to engage the other candidate to try to get a response from him. In our example, a video tracker for Earl Ray Tomblin might yell to Bill Maloney, “will you keep West Virginia wild and wonderful since you’re in the back pocket of natural gas industry fat cats?,” in hopes of getting a heated response from the candidate.

Most campaigns are best to take a passive approach, but if you have a video tracker who can pick up on an opportunity, give some leeway for the tracker to engage your opponent.

Constituent letter technique

In the West Virginia special election, Tomblin’s campaign should be on the lookout for this technique. Essentially, the Bill Maloney campaign could find a supporter to contact the Governor’s office asking where he stands on, for example, “lawsuit abuse” as Bill Maloney calls it on is campaign website.

One constituent writes Governor Tomblin and asks where he stands on “lawsuit abuse” with other information that indicates a bias against, say, medical malpractice lawsuits.
Another constituent writes Governor Tomblin and asks where he stands on a West Virginian’s “right to sue” doctors who negligently destroy a patient’s quality of life.

Once the responses are back, compare them. Does the Governor’s office respond with what these constituents want to hear? If so, the Maloney campaign just gathered some valuable intelligence that they could use against Tomblin in the campaign.

**Putting it all together**

Now that you have all of this information about your candidate and the opponent, organize it in a research book. Analyze the dossier. What picture does this paint about your candidate and the other candidate?

How can you brand your opponent? Is Maloney a flip flopper? Are Maloney’s values out of step with West Virginia? Is Maloney motivated by ego and power? Let’s say, for example, after looking at the opposition research, you have a strong narrative for two themes:

- Maloney only cares about energy industry tycoons and not about West Virginia
- Maloney doesn’t have the right experience to govern West Virginia

Test these themes using a public opinion poll. If the campaign were to brand Maloney as an energy industry insider who doesn’t care about creating local jobs from the Marcellus Shale or to put environmental safeguards in place, does that impact his level of support among respondents? How about the idea that he doesn’t have the experience to be Governor?

As Sun Tsu famously said, every battle is won before it is fought. If you research the opposition and test the findings in a public opinion poll, you will know if you have a winning campaign message and if you are positioning your opponent in a way that will move numbers.
Bonus: keeping tabs on your opponent

Throughout the campaign, you should monitor your opponent and compare that information to the research that you have in the opposition research book. Here are some great tools that help you monitor social media channels, news and blogs for your own candidate and the opposition:

- **Addictomatic**: Instantly create a custom page with the latest buzz on any topic. Addictomatic is a customizable dashboard to monitor any topic including the other candidate’s name and important campaign issues.
- **Google Alerts**: Get alerts via RSS or in your email of news, blogs, video and discussion boards centering on your candidate or opponent as it happens, daily or weekly.
- **Board Reader**: Search on the other candidates name to get results from discussion boards.
- **Topsy**: Real time search for the social web. Find out what people are saying about the other candidate on social networks.

If you’re interested in a more robust solution, [Radian6](http://www.radian6.com) and [Trackur](http://www.trackur.com) are premium social media monitoring and engagement platforms that work well.

Other resources

**Opposition research** by Campaign Handbook: the main uses of opposition research analysis and the different types of materials to look at during the research process.

**Opposition research in political campaigns** on C-SPAN (hour long video): examples of media stories that have come out of opposition research campaigns and some information on the process and tactics used in opposition research.

**Parties’ opposition research efforts fuel late ads** by the Rothenberg Political Report: explains where attack ads come from: opposition research.