

Tips for Interviewing Political Figures

Topic Exploration Paper

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ABSTRACT In this topic exploration paper I will be reflecting on my interviews with Don Bacon and Tony Vargas that took place when both candidates were running in the 2022 Midterm Elections for District Two of Nebraska; to evaluate how I did as an interviewer and what I can improve on if I ever have another opportunity to interview a political figure. I am currently a senior at the University of Nebraska, Omaha majoring in Journalism Media Communication. I have been researching Interview Techniques, and talked to current reporters about preparing for interviews. After reading this report, I hope you as the reader will walk away some tips and tricks for interviewing political figures.

INTRODUCTION

I was fortunate to interview Don Bacon and Tony Vargas for The Omaha News, the University of Nebraska, Omaha's student ran news organization, in regards to their campaigns while they ran for District Two of Nebraska. These interviews were conducted individually, in person, and in a one-on-one environment. The purpose for their interviews were to determine how their midterm election campaigns were going, as the last days approached for community members to vote. Some tips that I had prepared before their interviews, as well as, tips I learned after conducting their interviews are listed below. I will use my interviews with Bacon and Vargas to explain each tip. These tips focus on interviewing political figures, this article will not be covering interview basics. However, basic interviewing courtesy should still be applied when interviewing political figures.

Tips for Interviewing Political Figures

- Disclose the Nature of the Interview
- Develop Your Questions (Avoid the "Gotcha" Questions)
- Research Goes Both Ways
- Ask the Tough Questions
- Be Neutral, Politicians Are People Too

DISCLOSE THE NATURE OF THE INTERVIEW

After doing my interview with Bacon and Vargas the most often asked question I have gotten has been, “How were you able to arrange an interview with both candidates during the busiest time of their campaigns?” The truth of the matter is, I simply asked. When I contacted both candidates to ask them for an interview, I was completely transparent about the purpose of the interview. This gave both candidates a general idea of what type of questions I would be asking.

In Darren G. Lilleker’s article, *Interviewing the Political Elite: Navigating a Potential Minefield*. He mentions, “The main problem with not fully disclosing the nature of your research is that once the interview is arranged.... they may say ‘I’m not willing to talk about that’ and you find yourself attempting to make the effort and cost worthwhile by pursuing other, tangential avenues of inquiry.” (Lilleker, 2003, p. 210) You are at risk of not being able to get answers to the questions that you originally wanted answered by not disclosing the nature of the interview before hand. Resulting in wasting your time, as well as the candidates time.

DEVELOP YOUR QUESTIONS (AVOID THE “GOTHCHA” QUESTIONS)

Always have your questions ready before hand. This might seem like a given, but once you have developed your questions run through them with someone else. Like most interviews with political figures, I only had a limited amount of time with Bacon and Vargas so I had to determine what questions I would keep and what questions I would toss out. Below are the questions that I had originally developed, next to the final questions that I improved from getting feedback from professors and people who have worked in this field; that I actually asked each candidate.

My Original Questions	The Questions That I Asked
<p>1) How has your election campaign been going?</p> <p>2) What are your goals for the community when you take this position?</p> <p>3) How do you plan to achieve these goals?</p> <p>4) Hypothetically, if you lose this election what are your plans afterward?</p> <p>5) What are some of the challenges that you and your team had to overcome to get to where you are?</p> <p>6) Do you have anything to say to the people who voted for you in this election?</p> <p>7) Have the new congressional maps for the districts affected you, and how have you overcome this?</p> <p>8) What is your view on tax and spending?</p> <p>9) What is your view on Inflation and the economy?</p> <p>10) What is your view on student debt relief?</p> <p>11) Is there anything that I didn't ask you or we didn't talk about, that you would like to say?</p>	<p>1) There are only 4 days before election day, how's your election campaign been going?</p> <p>2) What are your goals for the community when you take this position?</p> <p>3) What are your top three most important things you're going to do when you take this position?</p> <p>4) Have the new congressional maps for the districts affected you, and how have you overcome this?</p> <p>5) Do you have anything to say to the people who voted for you in this midterm election?</p> <p>6) Hypothetically, if you lose this election what are your plans afterward?</p> <p>7) Is there anything that I didn't ask you or we didn't talk about, that you would like to say?</p>

As you might have noticed, I reduced the number of questions that I originally planned to ask. I did this by focusing of the purpose the interview and determining what questions were most important during the current state of the race.

Another thing you should avoid when developing your questions, or only do so when it is absolutely necessary are “Gotcha” questions. I sat down and talked with Instructor of Journalism and Media Communication at the University of Nebraska Omaha, Andrew Stem about preparing yourself for an interview with political figures. He refers to “Gotcha” questions as a question that the interviewer already knows the answer to, but the interviewer wants the information be said on the record. In some cases, depending on the topic, “Gotcha” questions might be necessary, but for the most part by asking “Gotcha” questions can make the interaction adversarial. Making it where the person that you have interviewed might not want to speak with you again. Which may affect how you get information if you happen to be a local reporter.

RESEARCH GOES BOTH WAYS

It makes sense that the interviewer will need to do some research when developing their questions. However, what I found most interesting about my interview with Bacon and Vargas was the research they must have done, or their people must have done about me and The Omaha News. As noted in my list of questions that I asked both candidates, I did not ask any questions about student debt relief, or college life in general. To my surprise both candidates segway their answers to better connect with the students at UNO. The reason why I make this point is that the people you are interviewing will do their research on you as well, so be sure the information about you being a reported is what you want to be known for.

ASK THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

Asking the tough questions can be “tough” hence the name, but what is the best way to ask those questions in order to get a response? The best way that I have found to ask these tough questions regarding political views is to frame the question the fairest way possible, be

completely neutral when asking the question. Political figures might answer questions that are uncomfortable for you by only answering part of the question, and try to shift the conversation point they want to discuss. It is important to probe the interviewee in order to get a response that fully answers your question.

However, sometimes political candidates will refuse to answer a question. In Mats Ekström article, *Announced refusal to answer: a study of norms and accountability in broadcast political interviews*, he mentions that; “In the doing of refusals, the interviewees relate to what can be described as basic preconditions of acting in the public as a politician. In the role of representing the institution of politics, the government and/or specific political parties, there are questions that politicians should not answer, as well as knowledge about what is going on in everyday political work that is not appropriate to bring into the public discourse. But how the politicians deal with different questions, and what type of accounts they produce, is not predetermined. On the contrary, accounts are chosen and designed in situations of interaction.” (Ekström, 2009, p. 693)

Majority of the time, depending on the topic, candidates will give you a response. There will be times where they might refuse to answer and you as an interviewer have to make a decision to carry on with the interview and go on to the next question, or determine that the question you are asking, that is being refused by the political figure, is important enough to continue probing. By doing so could jeopardize the opportunity to ask any additional questions.

BE NEUTRAL, POLITICIANS ARE PEOPLE TOO

Since you are interviewing Political figures, it is important to take a neutral approach. You may have your political beliefs, but don't let those beliefs cloud your judgement and ask

one-sided questions. In my interview with Bacon and Vargas, I was not a citizen in Nebraska, but instead I reside in Iowa; making it where I wouldn't be able to vote for either candidate. You don't have to go to that extreme when interviewing political figures, but staying neutral will make your findings be more credible.

Even though political figures tend to be the punch line for many jokes, politicians are people too and should be treated respectfully when conducting your interview. Show them you are interested in talking about the concerns of the community, and not trying to catch politicians in "Gotcha" questions.

CONCLUSION

This has been 5 tips to keep in mind while interviewing a political figure. Just remember, "No interview takes place in a vacuum, so always anticipate the unexpected." (Stewart, 2022, p. 88) When conducting an interview of any kind, not just with political figures, the amount of work you put in before the interview will make you stand out to other interviewers, and will prepare you for those unexpected moments.

REFERENCES

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