

The Political Librarian

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 3


2016

The Language of Politics and Libraries

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Recommended Citation

Sweeney, Patrick (2016) "The Language of Politics and Libraries," *The Political Librarian*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/pollib/vol2/iss2/3>

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Patrick Sweeney

It shouldn't be a surprise to anyone when I say that the political landscape in America has drastically changed. We have seen some of the wildest political rhetoric that we could imagine come from political pundits, politicians, our presidential candidates, and various media outlets. There are accusations of fundamental biases rooted in deep belief systems that are based on many of the fears of middle class Americans who have been left behind in the job market, Americans who feel threatened by outsiders, Americans who feel they are losing their familiar identities to anonymous and unknown forces. These fears are being capitalized upon by a multi-billion dollar political industry that is designed to exaggerate threats and use fear to win elections.

The most exaggerated of those fears that affect us, librarians, and our industry is a fear of government overreach and blaming taxation for a wide array of economic and social problems in the country. This fear didn't spontaneously come about into being by itself. It was coldly cultivated with big data, polling, focus groups, targeted messaging, and the strategic radicalization of highly specific populations within our citizenry. These political groups have used this data to develop new sets of exclusionary languages that allow people of the same beliefs to communicate and understand each other. This has led to the development of new political cultures within targeted demographics. These differentiating languages are one of the strongest walls against communication between differing political views. The language that is used is something that librarians, as government employees who are paid by taxes, must learn if they are to continue to serve their communities.

We saw examples of this in the debates between Hillary and Trump. Many television analysts commented that there were two very different debates happening on the stage. They seemed to be astonished that the two very different politicians were able to communicate well with their base and that preliminary discussions with viewers showed that very few people's minds were changed. This is a symptom of the shift in political language. When Trump speaks about strength and power, and Hillary speaks about collaboration and negotiation, the truth is that the ideologies around each idea have developed to the point where these are now mutually exclusive languages. So, the question is, do we have to develop the

language that we need to speak to these differing ideologies?

At EveryLibrary we strongly believe that the answer to this question is a resounding yes and we are working on learning this language. We have had the opportunity, as a non-partisan organization, to learn from each of the various political cultures within America. As an organization we have no opinion about which political belief system is best for the country, we only want to be able to have the language we need to communicate the definite and important need for libraries in America. That's why we have attended wildly different kinds of political trainings, webinars, and conferences. We have gone to learn about how people speak, think, and act - people from as far to the left as and as far to the right speak, think, and act. We have attended conferences like the progressive Netroots Nation and the Ballot Initiative Study Center. We have sat through online trainings and webinars from the conservative Leadership Institute and we have attended the Koch Brothers funded Americans For Prosperity Conference called Defending the Dream.

The one thing we have recognized is that each of these groups present their own sets of threats to libraries. In a progressive community like NetRoots Nation, libraries are missing from their policy agenda. In a conservative approach like the Americans for Prosperity, they actively target library ballot measures for defeat because they want to shrink government. If we don't address these threats by understanding the languages that they speak and adapting our core vocabulary about the value of libraries to them, we are threatened with extinction from both sides of the spectrum. More importantly, if we don't develop our own preservative language using the same big data, polling, and focus groups, as well as the mechanisms to get that language into the minds of the public at large, we will lose the war for American Libraries. Each side will slowly pull us apart or leave us behind as they develop more language that excludes the values of librarianship and the language we use to express that value.

This election in November is going to be the biggest test for libraries in a generation and we are expecting to learn a lot about this language. This will most likely be an election year with more local library measures on the ballot than any year since the recession. As we come out of

the recession and also hit a presidential election cycle, we are expecting around 250 libraries to be on the ballot. However, as we have heard from the political consultants and data experts that we work with there is no strong or definite opinion about the things that will affect a library election because we simply don't have the data. We can't predict if a strong base of anti-tax and anti-government voters will be motivated enough by the language of Trump to show up on election day and we don't know if there will be a correlation between those voters and votes about libraries. We also don't know if

the fear of that language will bring out more voters who are likely to support library measures. We also have big ideas but no strong language of our own to motivate our own base of supporters to ensure larger wins at the ballot box. If there is one thing we do know for sure, it's that if we don't learn to speak to these voters in their languages, or develop a language of our own to either motivate our own communities of supporters or as a bridge between the two languages, libraries will spiral into an unrecoverable dive towards defunding.