

Like a Scoop of Cherry Garcia

KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

Iowa resident Peggy Huppert began laying the foundation for the [Priorities Iowa Caucus Campaign](#) in September of 2005. Since then, the campaign has contacted over 12,000 Iowans and 8,000 have signed a [pledge](#) to "only caucus for a candidate who supports a significant shift in federal budget priorities away from nuclear and other obsolete Cold War weapons toward unmet social needs including education, health care, and energy independence."

With an average of 100,000 to 120,000 Iowa caucus voters, 8,000 voters pledged to this cause is a very significant number – in fact, John Kerry defeated John Edwards by just 6,900 votes in 2004. Over the past four election cycles, when there were more than four candidates in the race, the margin between the top four was often less than 8,000 votes.

"No other candidate is close to having this level of confirmed supporters," Huppert said.

John Norris, former national field director for Kerry-Edwards 2004 and an unpaid advisor to the Priorities Campaign, said, "When a candidate is evaluating who to listen to, one basic question they ask is: who's delivering people on election night?"

The parent organization for the campaign is [Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities](#), a coalition of 700 business executives founded by [Ben Cohen](#) that includes the present or former CEOs of Black Entertainment Television, Goldman Sachs, Hasbro, Men's Wearhouse, and Phillips Van Heusen - as well as Ted Turner and Nation partner Paul Newman.

The group came into existence as a response to Congress' skewed priorities: over half of the [federal discretionary budget](#) goes to the Pentagon and the US spends more on defense than the rest of the world combined. Meanwhile, problems like hunger, poverty, and infant mortality are – at best – given short shrift.

A [panel of military advisors](#), including [Lawrence Korb](#) – the former Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Reagan – estimates that \$60 billion per year could be [cut](#) from the Pentagon's \$463 billion budget (not including [war funding](#)) by reducing the further proliferation of nuclear weapons and other obsolete weapons systems. The Priorities Campaign is currently focused on getting Iowa and [New Hampshire](#) voters – and candidates – on board to demand these revenues be redirected to human needs.

The Priorities Campaign's strength comes from the clever and sassy way it touches people – not your usual policy papers and tired slogans – combined with old-school grassroots organizing. It uses [creative marketing strategies](#) designed by Cohen to reach voters and inspire them to take action. For example, a PigMobile consisting of three oversized piggy bank cars cruises throughout Iowa. In New Hampshire, the [Topsy-Turvy Bus](#) does the same. 30,000 [pens](#) with a pullout banner illustrating Congress' skewed budget priorities have been distributed in Iowa

alone and are commonly found at restaurants and coffee shops throughout the state. A [Cookie Mom](#) shows up at candidates' events, wearing an apron with the Sensible Priorities pie chart symbol, handing out cookies with the same chart in icing and contact information for the campaign written on the cellophane wrapping. Strategies such as these have grown the campaign so that there are now 12 full-time staff in Iowa, over 1,000 volunteers, and the aforementioned 8,000 pledged supporters. In New Hampshire, three full-time staff members run the campaign along with hundreds of volunteers.

The grassroots supporters of the Iowa and New Hampshire campaigns focus on "[bird-dogging](#)" candidates. They show up at events and ask them specific [questions](#) that are difficult to dodge and designed to get commitments from the candidates. The Priorities Campaign maintains a [scorecard](#) that tracks the positions of both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates. It will culminate in an endorsement and GOTV efforts on the candidate's behalf.

Cohen spoke of the campaign's early success: "We've tapped a vein in this country of people's desire to take care of their kids and some basic needs in a fiscally conservative way.... And we don't tell people, 'Hey, shift money from the Pentagon to social needs. We just show how the discretionary budget breaks down and people come to that conclusion themselves."

It's like eating a scoop of Cherry Garcia: you don't have to tell someone it's good. They know it when they taste it.