

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Political campaigns are orchestrated attempts by political organisations to garner public support through persuasive communication in order to influence public policy in their favour. This broad definition encapsulates all forms of campaigns from those of neighbourhood organisations seeking to influence local politicians to the campaigns of political parties and candidates who seek election to office in order to shape policy themselves. In pluralist democracies campaigns are crucial for representation. Campaigns are a means by which groups of individuals with a common cause can communicate their stance, enable others with similar concerns to join their campaign and so campaigns give voice to those individuals and the supporters of their cause.

The majority of academic research has focused on the campaigns orchestrated by those seeking election, in particular political parties or candidates seeking to be elected as national president. Due to the levels of resources, the campaigns run by candidates for the United States presidency are the most sophisticated and gain most attention. The campaign environment is more complex however. We here firstly explore that complex environment before discussing the evolution of political campaigns to being highly professional concluding with research around campaign effects.

The diverse campaign environment

In all democracies, and even some single party states, campaigns take place where parties, their leaders and a range of candidates for all levels of public office compete to govern, or be part of a governing group, of their nation. These campaigns are of ultimate importance as they ultimately determine the political programme of a nation and the way that government acts towards its own citizens as well as how it behaves towards other nations. Despite the importance of these contests, data from surveys across the EU member states by Eurobarometer, national election surveys, as well as turnout data from elections,

demonstrates turnout at elections and engagement with campaigns can be low involving as few as 50% of a nation's citizens. Evidence suggests that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are diverting support away from electoral organisations. NGOs have the ability to engage citizens with a single cause, whereas election campaigns encompass a range of issues. NGOs can be more populist, stridently arguing in favour of radical policies that appeal to their supporters, whereas electoral organisations have to be more circumspect and work within the constraints of a broad national interest as well as limitations imposed by international co-operation. NGOs also seldom come under scrutiny in the same way as electoral organisations and so do not lose trust due to being mired in scandal or having their credibility questioned by media. Hence the most crucial campaigns face severe challenges.

The challenges relate to the competitive environment and the clashes between campaigns. Outside of the cycle of elections, governing and oppositional parties engage in a permanent campaign in an attempt to retain relevance and support within society as well as, crucially for parties outside of government, providing continuing representation to their supporters. But, in the periods between elections, parties compete with a range of other organisations. The United Nations and its many subsidiary bodies highlight international causes and attempt to put pressure on governments, sometimes leveraging public support. Other organisations which operate at a global level, Greenpeace or Amnesty International for example, also seek to put pressure on governments via political channels and by garnering media attention and public support. At the national level there are also a range of organisations who constantly lead campaigns, often fighting against governments. Some of these organisations might employ lobbyists to further their causes using private channels of communication with elected representatives and officials. Others may use petitions or demonstrations to gain media attention, build public awareness, sympathy and support, in order to pressurise the same representatives. Many of these organisations compete with other employers of

lobbyists, big businesses in particular. Additionally, and while we might not traditionally think of such actions as campaigning, some individuals resort to violence to impact on public attitudes and government policy, the actions of terrorism groups fighting against British rule in Ireland as well as Islamist inspired terrorists are examples of groups that seek to influence governments and the public through their actions. The complex environment thus means each campaign must compete to gain awareness, interest, encourage support and then mobilise supporters into action. As the environment becomes ever more complex and competitive, campaigns must be more sophisticated, innovative and strategic to achieve their aims.

The evolution of campaigning

The theoretical perspectives that aid the understanding of how campaigning has developed from a pragmatic and amateurish art to a strategically planned science are based on studies of election campaigns. However the socio-economic conditions that have led electoral campaigns to evolve apply to the whole environment. Campaigning has evolved in reaction to three broad trends:

- 1) The end of class-based political alignment. It was argued that up until the 1960s politics was determined by social class. Parties could rely on large stable electorates and campaigns were simply focused upon mobilisation. Competing organisations were few, and so representation was achieved through the ballot box and parties reinforced their representational link to the concerns and aspirations of their support base. Issue politics, around war and race, emerged in the mid to late 1960s and saw parties challenged by protest and pressure groups. Social mobility weakened class identities and so attachments to political parties. Parties increasingly had to adapt their tactics to persuade potential voters, drawing on the skills of the advertising industry, and compete against myriad organisations focused on causes with strong grassroots support.

2) The fragmented media environment. The 1960s was also an era when there were limited media outlets, and those that existed took a fairly deferent tone towards politicians. The rise of commercial media and steady growth of outlets led to a greater focus on presentation and attempts to grab the attention of an audience seeking entertainment rather than hard political news. The shifting media environment led political organisations to seek the services of public relations experts in order to gain media coverage as well as to capture the attention and support of citizens. Digital technology has incrementally added new layers of complexity as political organisations had to adapt their communication for websites, weblogs and from 2005 social media platforms and microblogs. As audiences fragment across a range of channels and platforms political organisations seek to gain purchase within the minds of citizens using whatever techniques and tactics that are possible with the resources and legal restraints they face.

3) The collapse of deference and trust. While some political actors are still trusted and shown respect, the trend is towards cynicism among the public and some argue this is the direct effect of a shift in media coverage of politics. Research has shown that coverage of the processes, the internal machinations, that occur within political organisations as well as the coverage of scandals involving politicians lead to reduced trust and increased cynicism among citizens. Some scholars have particularly pointed to the rise of attack journalists as a major influence on public attitudes to politicians. The attack journalist claims to ask the questions the public wants answered and so adopts an adversarial tone when interviewing a politician, leading audiences to question the credibility and veracity of a politician's claims. Political organisations have employed the use of spin doctors to attempt to combat attack journalism and gain supportive coverage. It is argued, however, that this has led to an escalation in the battle between political actors, seeking to maximise positive coverage, and journalists seeking to advance their careers and put politicians under pressure.

While political parties and their elected representatives and candidates face the worst impacts of these trends in the communication environment and broader society they effect all actors involved to some extent, providing challenges and opportunities unequally across differing types of organisations.

Theoretical perspectives on campaign development

One heuristic for understanding the evolution of political campaigns is to separate the history into distinct eras. The 1960s represents the pre-modern or first age of campaigning when organisations tended to focus on face-to-face communication. It is in this era where the media offered a reasonably direct channel for politicians, but when parties also had strong, local organisations that could mobilise across communities within a nation. Parties also had a virtual hegemony over representation. The modern, second age is linked largely to the rise of television as the chief medium of public communication. However it coincided with significant social changes that led to the collapse of class-based cleavages and the rise of issue politics. Parties retained their importance but were challenged as the key providers of representation, particularly as media gave voice to myriad other organisations. The postmodern, third age sees the blending of interpersonal and mass media tactics in order to reach an increasingly fragmented audience with decreased trust in electoral politics. Whether we should talk of a fourth, Internet or hypermedia age to encompass the early years of the 21st Century is a moot question. While this largely reflects the broad communication tactics of the postmodern era, it argues that there is no longer a hierarchy in political organisations. While parties still seek governing power, the grassroots can mobilise and lead challenges to governmental power and, due to the affordances of connectivity provided by social media anyone can organise a political campaign if they are able to gain awareness and support through communicating across online networks.

Concurrent with these ages, the evolution of campaigns is explained in three ways.

1) Professionalization. Political organisations have increasingly brought in a range of consultants from the worlds of corporate communication to aid them develop campaigns that grab the attention of audiences, have resonance and salience and heighten a sense of desire among potential supporters. Professionalization is a synonym for a range of developments: an increased strategic focus on campaign design and execution, leading to an increased appearance of sophistication and measurement of potential effects prior to execution as well as the measurement of actual effects. Professionalization has also been measured, with indices developed to assess the prioritization of dimensions such as central organisation, allocation of resources as well as the focus on a range of different modes of communication. Recent studies of European Union member states using these measures find that most parties, independent of nation or resources, are reasonably equal in their overall levels of professionalism suggesting political campaigns follow a blueprint for elections with innovations most likely to occur within the communication tactics dimension.

2) Marketization. The twin trends of fragmentation among media audiences and increased cynicism towards politics has given rise to the construct of the citizen consumer who approaches politics with a 'what is in it for me' perspective. The extent to which the dutiful and engaged citizen has been lost from the political landscape is highly debatable. However, it is argued that political organisations offer potential supporters value-based reasons for getting engaged with their campaigns. The trend may be exacerbated by the transference of personnel and approach to politics from the corporate environment. It is suggested that political actions, a vote, a click on social media, a donation etc. are all given a value when they are promoted. Marketization, therefore, may reinforce or even create a search for value in political engagement as campaigns sell actions to potential supporters.

3) Mediatization. The power of the media as the chief means by which a political organisation can reach any significant number of potential supporters is argued to have

fundamentally impacted on the design and implementation of political campaigns. Strategy is built around media, with timetables drawn up for gaining and then building on media coverage. Equally communication is designed for media consumption with short phrases, or soundbites, built in to speeches to fit naturally into short news items; events are designed and timed to suit media priorities and provide pictures that will suit news bulletins; leaders present themselves in ways to maximise positive coverage and seek an edge when trying to make the news. Mediatization is linked to a trend towards the personalization of politics, with political actors allowing the media into their private lives to provide interesting stories that will appeal to potential supporters in a way that hard political news might not.

Therefore, political campaigns have slowly become more strategic and professional in their approach to courting potential supporters, they borrow the philosophy as well as techniques from corporate communication, and they increasingly pander to the demands of the media when designing both their strategy and communication. These three theoretical lines of enquiry explain differing facets of modern campaigns but should be seen as concurrent and simultaneous developments within the evolution of political campaigns.

Campaign effects

The greatest challenge is understanding what, if any, effect campaigns might have on citizens. Political campaigns certainly gather media coverage, and not only the election campaigns of the major parties or candidates. All campaigns can gain coverage if they fit to the media agenda or perform in some way the media believe will be interesting to their audience. If coverage equates to awareness then the first stage towards success is achieved by many campaigns. However awareness is insufficient unless it can motivate the aware into taking some action that is supportive of the campaign or its aims. While many campaigns may appear successful, on the basis that one candidate or party gains sufficient votes to govern or be part of a governing body it is unclear if this is the result of the campaign or of

other factors. Often pre-campaign polls predict the result well suggesting that the campaign was more of a ritual, played out on the basis that it is necessary and because competitors would be campaigning rather, than with any clear sense that the campaign will in itself persuade potential voters to turn out or support the candidate or party at the centre of the campaign. It is far easier to measure whether the campaigns of NGOs, which pursue gaining signatories to petitions, donations or participation in other forms of action, are successful. Hypothetically we can understand what effects campaigns should have drawing on the field of communication psychology. Awareness in itself is not a necessary precondition for success. Rather key campaign messages must appear salient, important, and resonate, appearing relevant, among the intended receivers. Intended receivers may appear to be a broad section of society but often campaign segment citizens by demographics, by their economic situation, or their political interests and predispositions on issues. Targeting messages enhances their salience and resonance as they speak directly to the concerns and hopes of the intended receiver. However, as with awareness, these are also not necessary factors for success.

The organisation leading the campaign must have credibility in the eyes of the receiver. Credibility can be achieved through communication performances, such as in interviews or debates, but credibility is usually a perception built up over time. Citizens will have built up an overall impression of an organisation and its leaders based on event-based impressions. Each will be weighted positively or negatively forming an overall positive or negative attitude which determines credibility and so whether this particular campaign is worthy of attention. If an individual or organisation has low credibility, usually due to a previous failure in their performance or behaviour, it is then unlikely they will be listened to seriously. Campaigns do, however, convince some to perform actions. Campaign communication uses techniques from advertising to grab attention, using dramatic images and language which

encourage the audience to engage cognitively. These communication tactics, known as peripheral cues, are ones which are designed to have momentary impact upon a receiver in order that they are stored in the subconscious. The repeating of similar messages, aligned to a particular organisation, leads the receiver to begin to associate the organisation with the message and, in theory, when action is requested they will act on the information stored. In order to achieve a desired effect the association must be between the organisation and its stance on an issue of importance to the receiver that resonates with that receiver's own concerns and desires. The message can be on a complex policy issue such as health, foreign policy or the environment, or a simple message talking of hope and change; success is predicated on a receiver wanting the promised outcome to occur and believing the organisation is capable of delivering.

Many campaigns play more on fears than hopes. Negative campaigns attempt to weaken support for an opponent by causing cognitive dissonance, making the receiver think twice about a choice they have made. A negative message may accept that a candidate, for example, is charismatic; but it will raise doubts about their authenticity and credibility asking the receiver, often bluntly, if liking someone is sufficient to elect them. A range of organisations might campaign negatively in order lead their intended receivers to reconsider their predispositions towards issues, parties or candidates juxtaposing the stance of the receiver with those of the target of the attack. Research shows they polarise voters into partisan camps but can have significant impact on those with low knowledge and a shallow understanding of politics.

Summary

Political campaigns are strategic and orchestrated attempts at persuading citizens to think and act in a way beneficial to the organisation or individual leading the campaign. Due to structural changes in society, media audiences and media themselves campaigns have become

increasingly professional, they draw heavily on lessons from corporate communication and are tailored to gain maximum coverage from mainstream media as well as reaching citizens directly using social media. Assessing effects is complex due to the plethora of communication which citizens face. However campaigns that build positive associations between their stance and an issue of concern among intended receivers and which are able to make those receivers cognitively engage have potential to shape behaviour.

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Further readings

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See Also

Civic Engagement, Cognitive Dissonance, Democracy, Emotions and Political Decision Making, Get-Out-the-Vote Efforts, Lobbying, Party Identification, Pressure Groups, Representative Democracy, Resource Mobilization, Social Influence, Social Movements, Talking Heads and Political Campaigns, Voter Identification, Voter Mobility, Voting Behavior,