To What Extent and in What Ways do Election Campaigns Matter?

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Summary

The collapse of the traditional social ties, the advance of the mass media and the advent of political marketing have altered the structure and the direction of electoral campaigns. Present-day media-mediated electoral campaigns are hotly debated. On one side are those who claim that campaigns simplify political reality, manipulate voters, encourage voting apathy and in the long run contribute to democratic deficit. On the other side are those who claim that campaigns had to adapt to the new communication environment, that only the attractive, media-honed campaigns can attract voters' attention and that the majority of campaigns on the whole are a positive influence on electoral participation and voters' familiarity with political processes. This paper is an attempt to present the arguments of both sides and to answer how and to what extent electoral campaigns affect the democratic process.

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Introduction

If the most basic function of the campaign "is to inform voters about the choices before them and to mobilize citizen participation" (Norris et al, 1999:20), then the question of the importance of election campaigns in democratic society should be to what extent and in what ways do they fulfil this primary goal and thereby enhance the democratic process. However, in the light of contemporary campaigning practice and the growing controversy

about its effects, this question may as well address the issue of the final election outcome, that is to say, whether campaigns win votes for certain political options.

Because of the size of the area and extensive literature elaborating both perspectives, the essay will focus only on the campaigns' contribution to democratic procedure. It will first examine the changes in campaigning practices that stemmed as a consequence of the "modernization" process (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Then it will look at the expressed concerns about the elements of contemporary campaigning.

Giving all credit to the accounts of civic disenchantment with politics, I will argue that campaigns remain the platform for citizens to acquire relevant information to evaluate government's performance and learn about political options. I will also stress the importance of campaigns in bringing new political forces into arena.

The essay will not deal with specific campaigning or advertising techniques. Because of the space limitations, it will focus on the elements of the modern campaigning as witnessed in the USA and Great Britain but with an emphasis on the importance of the "contextual factors"[1] for any serious analysis of election campaigns.

Contemporary election campaigns

Election campaigns have undergone major transformation in the last few decades. In order to understand them, three perspectives should be examined more closely: the changes in party loyalty, *the* rapid development of the mass media and the rise of political marketing.

The process of "modernization", characterized by "increasing social complexity" (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 9) and growing fragmentation, led to a break with the traditional social ties. Party affiliation, which was previously related to class, became a matter of personal preference. "In many democracies", write Swanson and Mancini (ibid.: 250) "voting seems to have been transformed from an expression of solidarity with one's group and its institutions to, today, an expression of one's opinions". Transformed parties had to turn to an individual voter abandoning their strong ideological positions and becoming what Kirchheimer calls (1966) "catch-all" parties: "Parties in secular, welfare states were decreasingly able to rely on appeals to class, religion and ideology and increasingly forced to broaden their bases

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[1] Specifics of the national context that affect performance of election campaigns. Swanson and Mancini (1996) list five factors: election system, the structure of party competition, regulation of campaigning, national political culture and national media system.

of support among diverse interest groups" (Scammell, 1999: 726). Parties became largely susceptible to alternative forms of gaining voters' support. Solutions came from the media and the emerging new business philosophy.

In recent years traditionally aligned British newspapers have moved away from their partisan agenda (Norris et al. 1999.), trying to position themselves in the market. The trend was followed by other European countries with strong tradition of partisan press, such as the Netherlands. In the USA the break up with newspapers as the "forum for well-written partisan propaganda" (Perloff, 1999: 29) happened much earlier, at the end of the 19th century when the parties lost free billboards for their political messages.

The rise of television gave another slant to election campaigns. With its technological characteristics, television imposed new rules of coverage. Political parties and candidates had to adjust "tailoring more of their activities and decisions to the demands of media logic, engaging in highly visual events staged for television, scheduling activities to meet media deadlines, pushing telegenic candidates and spokespersons to the front, polishing their abilities to produce 'sound bites'" (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 252). This led to a greater profesionalization or "scientificization" of politics engaging number of experts who relied on opinion polls and believed in the media power of emotional and affection appeal to tailor political message to "voters' opinions and concerns" (ibid: 251).

No analysis of the role of the media in election campaigns should, however, look at them only as channels for disseminating paid political advertising. The media are independent power centres, driven with their own market interests and professional logic. The latter perspective seems to be even more important when trying to unfold the effects of campaigns because of "the seeming impartiality of news reports as opposed to advertisements" (Schoenbach in Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 92) and the fact that some countries do not allow paid political commercials on radio and television nor even allot free time in public-service broadcasts (e.g. Sweden).

The third important perspective in thinking about contemporary campaigning practice is the rise of political marketing. Business philosophy of aggressive sales and persuasion has since the 1960s been replaced by "costumer-oriented or marketing focus" (Scammell, 1999: 724). Political parties have adopted market research techniques and communication strategies, developed by the business sector, to reach vast audiences. Philip and Neil Kotler (1999: 13) argue that "the first rule of effective campaigning is for the campaign to reflect the interest of the voters". Bruce I. Newman (1994) suggests that the old concept of parties pursuing their ideologies has now been replaced by the marketing concept that segments the electorate, creates the candidates image accordingly and targets voters with specific, finely brushed messages.

The mutual adjustment between the media and politics and their common need to adjust to an increasingly competitive environment led to the modern media-centred (Swanson and Mancini, 1996) or the post-modern (Norris, 2001) campaigns.

In which way then, if any, do these campaign practices, as deployed by parties and the media, affect the democratic procedure?

Harmful or enriching campaigns?

There is a growing concern among scholars that contemporary campaigning techniques, accompanied with the media focus on "strategic election game, tabloid scandal and down-market sensationalism" (Norris et. al, 1999) diminish democratic process. The strategies of spin and selling are accused of blurring substance, praising image over issues and personalities over programs. Audiences become bored and sceptical, reluctant to engage. What may be effective campaigning in the sense of winning the elections, may on the other hand endanger the main democratic purpose of the elections as they should include the "process of rational deliberation about issues, candidates and parties by well-informed citizens" (Norris et al, 1999: 5).

The strongest criticism comes from the accounts of *videomalaise* that claim that "common practices in political communications by the news media and by party campaigns hinder civic engagement, meaning learning about public affairs, trust in government and political activism" (Norris, 2000: 2). The term was first popularized by Michel Robinson in the mid 1970s to describe the relationship between television journalism in the USA and the feeling of distrust and scepticism over political performance. The burst of discontent in the USA in the 1990s argued that "serious political debate, serious policy problems, serious election coverage becomes marginalized in an entertainment-driven celebrity-oriented society" (Norris, 2000: 3). Europe has been expressing similar concerns about the growth of low-quality media outlets that have preferred "sensationalism", "tabloidization" and "infotainment" over serious coverage (ibid: 5).

However, taking into account all the general concerns about public scepticism and disenchantment with politics, I would try to overrule some of the accusations and argue that campaigns still enhance the knowledge of the voters about political choices they have, provide a forum to evaluate government's performance, introduce new options into political arena and bring political information to broad segments of public.

The idea of early campaigns with politicians pursuing common cause and huge masses involved in a rational debate, as opposed to today's misleading and disengaging campaigns, many would agree (Swanson and Mancini,

91

1996; Norris, 2001; Perloff, 1999) is a rather romantic view of history. Two centuries ago politics was reserved for the elites. Voting was a rare privilege and casting a vote was an expression of party loyalty. The parties in the USA used posters and pamphlets to support their candidates but the partisan press was the core of the advocacy. Perloff (1999: 22) warns of the politics' early tendency to become personal and to rely on attacks: "Republican editors smeared Adams, charging that he was a monarchist plotting to set up a 'dynastic succession with his sons'" while the "Federalist supporters called Jefferson an atheist and a traitor and accused him of raping a slave". Schoenbach (1999: 94) also argues that personalization has always been an important attribute of politics adding "'visibility' to the political process" while Bartle and Griffiths (2001: 5) claim that campaigning has always tended to focus on party leaders and that "the idea that elections have since become increasingly "presidential" has – on the whole – been somewhat exaggerated".

While early campaigns are often portrayed as the time of intensive communication between party leaders, membership and chorus of supporters, modern campaigns are accused of fostering parties' detachment from citizens and a loss of ties with supporters. Involved citizens have been, through media-centred campaigns, turned into spectators. Let us, however, take a look at the other side of the coin. Face-to-face campaigns were primarily gathering loyal supporters while modern campaigns, as Swanson and Mancini (1996: 274) argue, increase "the exposure to political information of historically less interested and less informed segments of the population". Paddy Scannell (1989: 155) argues that "broadcasting socializes private life", turning watching into a ritual of discussion about the program. Viewers are not in "thrall to the aura of the event" (ibid: 155) and can see through the rhetoric. Norris (2001: 167) suggests that the "post-modern campaigns facilitate a return to some earlier forms of interactivity". The Internet has certainly ushered in a range of possibilities.

The bulk of criticism (e.g. Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1992) has been directed at negative campaigns and attack ads as contributing to general public cynicism and turning voters away from polling booths. Jamieson (2000) goes through a range of instances to prove that this view is mistaken: "In sum, campaigns matter, as does the discourse of candidates and the coverage provided by the press. Rebuttal is part of a robust politics, as is accurate, fair attack that speaks to issues of importance to voters'. In her earlier work (1992, in Norris et al., 1999: 67) she argued that it is intrinsic to democracy to have parties that question each others' policy.

An extensive analysis of the British general elections in 1997 (Norris et al., 1999: 113) also sheds different light to the set of claims that the decline of the voters' turnout should be to a great extent blamed on the media cover-

age. Those who paid big attention to news on television and in the press were found to show greater knowledge about party politics and were more likely to turn out. In her later article Norris (2001: 171) confirms that the attention to the news media and party campaigns is "positively associated with political knowledge, trust and activism". Based on the survey of the 1992 and 1996 US presidential elections, Cappela, Jamieson and others (2000: 96) argue that "a critical amount of ad exposure enhances ad's ability to stimulate voter turnout".

Furthermore, when trying to rebut accusations about forms and contents that are likely to "dumb down" (Street, 2001) political news, one can call into mind Popkin's (1991) argument about the reasoning voter who uses "shortcuts" to learn about politics. Campaigns have merely adjusted to the forms of presentation that are more suitable for the contemporary communication environment: "The new political techniques of the electronic era are merely an extension of a well-established tradition of politics, which is to adopt and adapt to prevailing forms of communication" (Street, 2001: 187). More importantly, these are recognized to receive better public attention : "The point is that the chat show and other devices of the modern politician may be as revealing as more formal acts of political communication" (Street, 2001: 211).

While it is possible to widely expound the thesis supporting the elements of the modern campaigns, there is one particular aspect that should be highlighted. One of the biggest contributions of modern campaigns is that they introduce new political options – or devote greater attention to the already existing, but not the leading ones – that in the short run may affect the distribution of parliamentary seats and in the long run even change a party system. Since the 1930s – the period known as "freezing" – the same five parties have been represented in the Swedish parliament. In 1991 the right-wing populist party, New Democracy, succeeded in winning some seats in the Riksdag although "it was created only six months before the elections and lacked any actual member organization" (Asp and Esaiasson, 1996: 79). Three years before, the Greens, a party concerned mainly with environmental issues, entered the parliament. Both parties were given extensive media coverage during their election campaign. The New Democracy received constant but unfavourable coverage, which nevertheless allowed the leaders to convey their message to the public. The success of the Greens may be attributed to the dominance of environmental issues during the election year, especially having in mind that it lost some seats in 1991. In the series of surveys of the 1997 British general elections, Norris and others (1999) recorded that the Liberal Democrats tripled their share of votes in the twelve-month period before the election day. The Liberal Democrats ran the most effective and the most positive campaign and their support "climbed sharply in the last week before the polling day" (ibid: 174). An independent candidate in

the 1992 US presidential elections, Ross Perot, won 19% of the popular vote, more than any third-party candidate since Teddy Roosevelt in 1912 (Wray, 1999). Perot spent $70 million on the campaign because he was financing it all by himself and was not constrained by any finance law. Boris Mikšić, a Croatian businessman and a member of the Croatian diaspora in the USA was one of the presidential candidates in the 2005 Croatian presidential elections. He invested heavily (his own money) in his campaign and got 17.9% of the votes and unexpectedly won the third place in the first round. This brings us to a key feature of campaigns that *does* present a real threat to democracy and in the welter of criticism, seems frequently overlooked. Campaigns are expensive, the costs are likely to rise[2] and parties and candidates are willing to invest even more in their own success. Ross Perot could participate in the election because he was wealthy enough to run an extensive campaign. Although it would be wrong to attribute his success only to the money he had spent, this certainly played an important role and this is exactly where democratic procedure might be challenged. Two questions should be posed. The first one is about fair competition and equal access and the second one about transparency of the interests that lie behind financial supporters. Although different countries have different regulation and the importance of the issue varies accordingly, the question of campaign financing poses a great challenge to the democratic process.

Conclusion

As democratic society has undergone an evolution driven by the "increasing social complexity" (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 9), so have campaigns. Party dealignment, the emergence of the new media and the rise of political marketing have changed the structure and the course of election campaigns. The break with traditional social ties caused parties to loose their core supporters – they had to join the market game. The media were recognized as pervasive and powerful channels of reaching vast audiences. In order to have their messages properly conveyed, parties and candidates had to adjust to the market and the professional logic of the media. "Heavy emphasis on personalization, extensive reliance on mass media for campaign propaganda, incorporation of professional expertise, adapting campaign ac-

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[2] In 1992 US presidential election three candidates (Bush, Clinton, Perot) spent more than $120 milion on televison advertising. In 1996 total expenditure for televison advertising hit almost $200 million (Lee Kaid, 1999: 424).

In 1945 general election between £100,000 and £150,000 was spent by both the Labour and the Conservative Party. In 1992 the Labour Party spent £8.4 million and the Conservatives £11.2 million. In 1997 expenditures rose to £14.9 milion for the Labour and £28.3 milion for the Conservative Party (Bartle and Grifiths, 2001: 11).

tivities and strategies to media requirements" (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 269) led to an outburst of critics accusing both politicians and the media of fostering public distrust, cynicism and political apathy.

Critics, however, seem to have ignored the obvious. Politicians are today, more than ever, subject to public and media scrutiny. In the election period, this process intensifies. Campaigns provide a platform to evaluate the existing and introduce some new players. With the proliferation of newspapers and television channels, political information is available to everyone. Although the quality of messages may be challenged, the diversity of sources guarantees at least a theoretical possibility for citizens to acquire information necessary to reach a rational decision.

The fears about political advertising or media coverage in the USA do not necessarily apply to other countries that have strict regulations about political advertising in terms of the broadcasting time allocated or the funds spent (e.g. Sweden). Israel, for example, has a unique regulation of print advertising that precisely controls the size of ads, the number of ads each party can run every day, even the number of colours that may be used (Swanson and Macini, 1996: 259). Each country has its "contextual factors" that can provide the correct picture only taken as a whole.

Election campaigns, therefore, should not be assessed as a socially isolated and intermittent phenomenon. The only proper way to look at them is within the macro context of "modernization" and the micro context of specific national settings.

In that regard, the efforts to identify the causes of public disappointment with politics, as Pippa Norris (Norris 2001: 177) suggests, should be directed elsewhere: "If the public is disenchanted with their leaders and institutions, if citizens are making greater demands on governments, as seems evident in many countries, then we should look more directly at the performance of representative democracy and less at the surface reflections".

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