

Campaigns and Elections

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On the day after Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential election, the lead story in the *New York Times* said this: "The story of Mr. Obama's journey to the pinnacle of American politics is the story of a campaign that was, even in the view of many rivals, almost flawless." This sentiment—which implicitly attributes Obama's victory to his campaign activities—is commonplace in the news media. While the campaign is underway, media accounts similarly focus on every twist and turn, suggesting that all kinds of events matter—in 2008, anything from Obama's comment about "bitter voters who cling to guns" to Jeremiah Wright and William Ayers. The portrait that emerges is one of instability and unpredictability: with a blizzard of ads, money, spin, and counter-spin, we don't know what voters will do and so we don't know who will win.

And yet, at a meeting of political scientists held over Labor Day weekend in 2008— even before the start of the Republican National convention —a panel of political scientists each presented a forecast of the outcome. Almost all of them predicted the exact outcome within a couple of percentage points. The average of their predictions was 53%, and that's what Obama got. That is a little bit lucky, but still it raises some important questions. How is it possible that elections are so predictable even amidst the apparently volatility of the campaign? And if elections are so predictable, how much does the campaign matter?

To tackle these questions, we first discuss what is so lacking in news coverage: why the influence of campaigns might in fact be limited. We discuss how voters' choices depend in part on "the fundamentals," including longstanding political identities and larger political events and trends—all of which are largely outside of the control of campaigns and make both voters and elections predictable. This presents a further puzzle: if the fundamentals matter so much, then why do the polls vary during the campaign? In fact, the ups and downs in the polls do suggest a role for the campaign. We then consider the circumstances in which campaigns can matter and three different ways that campaigns matter: changing voters' minds, changing the criteria they use in making decisions, and "getting out the vote" or encouraging them to participate on Election Day. Ultimately, political campaigns do play some role, although their contribution to the election's outcome may still be outweighed by events beyond the candidates' control.

The Predictability of Voters

Voters rarely approach a campaign as blank slates, devoid of ideas about politics or the candidates. In fact, in many elections, voters can draw on long-standing political identities to guide their choices, even without any detailed information about the candidates. Some relevant identities involve race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religion. The power of race derives in part from the historical linkages between racial communities and political parties, linkages that are nurtured by the attention parties pay to the concerns of racial groups. For example, African-Americans have a longstanding tie to the Democratic Party because it, more than the Republican Party, took up the cause of civil rights. Even 40 years after the Civil Rights Movement, the tie remains strong. It is nurtured by Democratic politicians, who pursue policies favored by most African-Americans and who routinely engage in symbolic gestures, such as speaking before the

NAACP or in predominantly black churches. It is also nurtured by African-American leaders who provide important cues for their followers, suggesting explicitly or implicitly that Democratic candidates deserve support. Finally, it is nurtured by the simple fact that residential and other patterns of segregation ensure that African-Americans associate mostly with each other, thereby making it less likely they will encounter opposite or alternative political views. For these and other reasons, the vast majority of African-Americans—upwards of 90% in presidential elections—vote for Democratic candidates. One can easily tell a similar story about other groups—for example, white evangelical Christians, whose close ties to the Republican Party have arisen via a similar process. In all such cases, voters behave predictably based on social identities and their associated group interests, which limits the ability of the campaign to persuade them otherwise.

Voters are also predictable because of *party identification*, which was discussed in chapter 7. Party identification is psychological tie to a political party, which means that voters tend to think of themselves as members of a party and that they feel some affinity for it. It does not change for most people, despite dramatic political or personal events. In fact, some researchers have found party identification as stable as religious identification.¹ This is not to say that party identification never changes, but typically it changes only gradually.

The relevance of party identification to campaigns and elections is two-fold. First, party identification influences how we see the world and process new information. The biases it creates (see chapter 7) are very relevant to elections. For example, different groups of partisans watch the exact same candidate debate and somehow conclude that their candidate won. After

¹ Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

the second presidential debate in 2008, a CNN poll found that 85% of Democrats believed that Obama won, and 64% of Republicans thought that McCain won.

Second, party identification also influences how we make political choices, notably voting. Voters who identify with a party are very loyal to that party's candidates. Although voters sometimes "defect" and vote for a candidate of the opposite party—due to that candidate's appealing personality, or some compelling policy issue, or to the lack of a credible candidate in their own party—this is the exception rather than the rule. In fact, defections have become increasingly rare. Partisans have become more loyal to their parties, and fewer and fewer voters "split their tickets" by voting for candidates of different parties for different offices.

The true nature of contemporary party identification flies in the face of much conventional wisdom, which suggests that party identification has weakened as more and more voters have come to identify as "independent." Pundits routinely claim that independents are numerous—the "largest group in the electorate," "the vast middle ground where elections are won and lost in America," and "the fast-growing swatch of voters."² It is true that the number of people who call themselves independent has grown to outnumber the fractions calling themselves Democrats or Republicans. But most of these independents profess that they "lean" toward one of the two major parties and, in elections, are just as likely to vote for that party as many who identify with that party in the first place.³ Both facts were illustrated in 2008. In that

² David Brooks, "What Independents Want," *New York Times*, November 5, 2009, accessed August 26, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/06/opinion/06brooks.html> ; Fareed Zakaria, "Obama Should Act More Like a President Than a Prime Minister," *Washington Post*, January 25, 2010, accessed August 26, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/24/AR2010012402300.html?hpid=opinionsbox1>; Matt Bai, "The Great Unalignment," *New York Times*, January 20, 2010, accessed August 26, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/24/magazine/24fob-wwln-t.html?ref=magazine> .

³ Bruce E. Keith et al., *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); John Sides, "Three Myths About Political Independents," *The Monkey Cage*,

year's American National Election Study, a large election survey carried out by political scientists, only 12% of the sample, and 7% of self-reported voters, identified as independent and did not indicate any leaning toward a political party. These "pure" independents were fairly evenly split between Obama and John McCain (58-42%). However, independents who leaned Democratic were almost unanimously behind Obama: 91% reported voting for him. Independents who leaned Republican were almost as loyal to McCain: 82% voted for him.

The relevance of party identification for campaigns is obvious: no amount of clever advertising by one candidate will persuade many of those who identify with the opponent's party to change their minds. Campaigns often only reinforce party loyalty rather than encourage defections. This is the conclusion of many studies of American presidential elections stretching back to the 1940s.⁴ And when campaigns do have an impact, it is often small. During the 2008 campaign, Obama's and McCain's poll numbers only ever changed by a few percentage points at most. Of course, in close elections, the decisions of less predictable and truly independent voters can be consequential. But media coverage—with its laser focus on these voters—understates how much of voting is an entirely predictable expression of social and partisan identities.

The Predictability of Elections

When political scientists were able to predict the 2008 election, they did so two months ahead of time, before the candidate debates and the vast majority of television advertising.⁵ The

December 19, 2009.

http://www.themonkeycage.org/2009/12/three_myths_about_political_in.html

⁴ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948); Steven E. Finkel, "Reexamining the 'Minimal Effects' Model in Recent Presidential Campaigns," *Journal of Politics* 55 (1993): 1-31.

⁵ "Forecasting Recap," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42, no. 1 (January 2009).

predictability of elections stems from how fundamental factors affect how we vote and thus, who wins the election.

Two factors are most important, especially in presidential elections: the health of the economy, and whether the country is at war (particularly an unsuccessful war) or at peace.⁶ Their importance seems sensible: prosperity and peace are foundational goals, without which it is difficult for government to accomplish other things. The reason both factors affect elections is because they underlie the public's evaluation of political figures. The public holds elected officials responsible for how well the economy is doing and whether the United States is at war (and, if so, whether it is winning). Presidents are held most responsible and, if the president is not running for reelection, then his party is held responsible. When the economy is doing well and the country is at peace, the incumbent president or his party will do better than when the economy is weak and war casualties are mounting. Voters behave "retrospectively"—looking backwards at the state of the country and evaluating incumbents accordingly.

Retrospective voting sounds sensible and fair, but in some ways it is not. For one, presidents and their co-partisans have limited control over the economy and many events that take place during war, so they probably do not deserve much of the credit or blame that they receive. In fact, retrospective voting sometimes appears to depend on events that have nothing to do with politics at all, much less the actions of incumbent leaders. For example, incumbent leaders do better in elections held soon after the local college football team has won: a victory is worth about an extra 1% for the incumbent, and 2% if the team is a well-known powerhouse.⁷

⁶ Douglas Hibbs, "Bread and Peace Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections," *Public Choice* 104 no. 1-2(2000): 149-180; John Zaller, "Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31 (1998): 182-189.

⁷ Andrew J. Healy, Neil Malhotra, and Cecilia Hyunjung Mo, "Irrelevant Events Affect Voters' Evaluations of Government Performance," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107, no. 29 (2010): 12804-12809.

Second, the public's judgment about the economy is not necessarily sound. Voters can be more influenced by media reporting about the economy than the economy itself. This helps explain why, in 1992, Bill Clinton benefited from perceptions of a weak economy, even though the recession was over.⁸ Moreover, voters' memories are short: they are much more influenced by change in the economy in the year before the presidential election, and tend to ignore the prior years.⁹ A president who presides over three years of a bad economy and then one final year of growth may do better than a president who presides over three years of growth and one final year of recession.

[insert Figure 1 about here]

These points are illustrated in Figure 1. Both graphs in this figure depict the relationship between economic growth, measured as change in real per capita disposable income, and presidential election outcomes, measured as the incumbent party's percentage of the major-party vote. The top graph relies on a measure of economic growth over the last three years of the president's term, assuming that his policies would not take effect until the second year of his term. As economic growth increases, so does the incumbent party's share of the vote. But in the bottom graph, which relies on a measure of economic growth only in the election year, the relationship between the economy and election outcomes is stronger: the line capturing the relationship tilts upward more steeply, and the datapoints representing election years are more closely clustered around the line. Presidential election outcomes thus depend more on recent economic trends than on the trend across a president's term.

⁸ Marc Hetherington, "The Media's Effect on Voters' National Retrospective Economic Evaluations in 1992," *American Journal of Political Science* 40 (1996): 372-395.

⁹ Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Presidential elections are not the only contests where the fundamentals, particularly economic performance, loom large. Similar factors affect congressional, state and local elections as well. On their face, congressional elections might seem difficult to predict because states and House districts, not to mention congressional candidates, are so diverse. And it is certainly true that the unique circumstances within districts matter. However, congressional elections also depend on national trends. Just as voters punish the president for a weak economy, they also punish representatives from the president's party. In election years when the economy is weak and the president unpopular, the president's party can expect to lose seats in Congress.¹⁰ The 2010 election was no exception: the Democratic Party lost 6 Senate seats and more than 60 House seats. The economy is also an important factor in state elections, particularly gubernatorial elections, though a state's particular economic circumstances may be more important than national trends in such elections.¹¹

The predictability of elections limits how much campaign strategy can accomplish. Certainly no amount of campaigning will change the state of the economy or improve prospects in war. These fundamental factors may be out of the control of any leader. Certainly they are out of the control of any challenger. Nonetheless, they strongly affect their chances of winning, and may render campaign strategy irrelevant in some cases. If an incumbent president is running amidst a weak economy, even a brilliant campaign may not be enough. Similarly, strategic wizardry may be superfluous when conditions are favorable. Consider the 2008 election, conducted amidst a recession and financial crisis. Was Obama's victory, as the *New York Times*

¹⁰ Gary Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009), 7th edition.

¹¹ Lonna Rae Atkeson and Randall W. Partin, "Economic and Referendum Voting: A Comparison of Gubernatorial and Senatorial Elections," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 1 (March 1995): 99-107; Deborah A. Orth, "Accountability in a Federal System: The Governor, the President and Economic Expectations," *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 412-432.

suggested, the story of a flawless campaign? Or would a mediocre campaign have had much the same result, so difficult was it for the Republican Party to hold onto the presidency as home foreclosures were increasing and banks were failing?

In addition to the fundamental forces of the economy and war, there is another factor that can often overshadow even the best campaign: the presence of an incumbent running for reelection. There may be occasions when an incumbent is disadvantaged, such as during an economic crisis or a scandal, but in most cases incumbency is an asset. Even if things look bad for the incumbent's party, the incumbent will usually stand a better chance than a new candidate of the same party running in an open-seat race. This is because the incumbent is almost always better known than the challenger, and voters tend to favor more familiar candidates unless they are strongly supportive of the opposite party.

The size of the incumbency advantage varies with the visibility and nature of the office. In general, since higher offices attract more famous challengers, the incumbency advantage is reduced. Incumbent presidents definitely have an advantage; since World War II, seven of the ten presidents who ran for reelection won. But their advantage is not as great as that enjoyed by senators, who have enjoyed a reelection rate of 75% or higher since 1982. Even incumbent senators' advantage pales in comparison to that of their House counterparts, at least 86% of whom have been re-elected in every election since 1982. In fact, in five of these elections, 98% of House incumbents running for reelection have been reelected. Even in the 1994, 2006, and 2010 elections, in which new House majorities were swept into office in spectacular fashion, 90%, 94%, and 86% of incumbents still managed to win reelection, respectively.¹² The incumbency advantage is so strong in these elections that many potential challengers choose not

¹² "Reelection Rates Over the Years," Center for Responsive Politics, accessed August 30, 2010, <http://www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/reelect.php>. 2010 figures from the authors' calculations.

to run rather than risk a defeat that could set back their political careers. This is why, in the 2010 general election, 27 House incumbents ran totally unopposed. In most elections, incumbents do face a challenger, but it is rarely the most qualified or well-known challenger possible; high-quality challengers are especially likely to bide their time and wait for open-seat races that they have a good chance of winning.¹³

The nature of the office also determines the size of the incumbency effect. Research has shown that incumbent members of Congress owe some of their advantage to constituent casework—essentially, favors that congressional staff do for constituents (e.g., helping to track down a Social Security check that was lost in the mail).¹⁴ Members of Congress also enjoy the franking privilege, which allows them to send certain kinds of mail to their constituents without paying for postage, thereby increasing their name recognition. Furthermore, being a member of Congress is a full-time job with a generous salary (currently, \$174,000), allowing members to devote themselves completely to politics. Many legislators in the American states and around the world do not enjoy a large staff, free postage, or a full-time salary, and their incumbency advantage is therefore reduced. Scholars have demonstrated that the more professionalized and “Congress-like” a state legislature becomes, the more reliably its incumbents are reelected.¹⁵

As we shall see, in the rare instances when incumbents are defeated, the challenger’s campaign plays a crucial role. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these are in fact rare

¹³ Gary W. Cox and Jonathan N. Katz, “Why Did the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections Grow?” *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 2 (May 1996): 478-497.

¹⁴ Bruce E. Cain, John A. Ferejohn and Morris P. Fiorina, “The Constituency Service Basis of the Personal Vote for U.S. Representatives and British Members of Parliament,” *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 1 (March 1984): 110-125.

¹⁵ William D. Berry, Michael B. Berkman and Stuart Schneiderman, “Legislative Professionalism and Incumbent Reelection: The Development of Institutional Boundaries,” *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 4 (December 2000): 859-874; John M. Carey, Richard G. Niemi and Lynda W. Powell, “Incumbency and the Probability of Reelection in State Legislative Elections,” *Journal of Politics* 62, no. 3 (August 2000): 671-700.

events. In many cases, the natural advantages of incumbency are too much for any campaign to overcome. This reality discourages many potential challengers or the opposing party from even trying.

When Campaigns Matter

Even though elections are often predictable, this does not mean the campaign is utterly irrelevant. For example, even if a weak economy helped Obama in 2008, he was not always ahead in the polls during the campaign. After the Republican National Convention, McCain surged to the lead for a couple weeks, making Democrats very nervous. Such changes in fortune are not uncommon in elections. There were weeks and even months where John Kerry and Michael Dukakis seemed destined to become the next president. Clearly, events that happen during the campaign can matter over and above the fundamentals, which, while powerful, do not entirely explain election outcomes. In fact, as we discuss later, campaigns may help ensure that the fundamentals end up influencing the election's outcome by making voters think more about the economy. But this does not mean that every campaign event will matter. To unpack the effects of campaigns, it is helpful to think about when exactly campaigns matter. Two factors are paramount: the number of undecided voters and the balance of resources among the competing candidates.

Campaigns will have larger effects when there are more voters who have not made up their minds. Although most voters can draw on social and partisan identities to make decisions about candidates, there will still be some who are uncertain about or unfamiliar with the candidates. Whenever these voters are more numerous, the campaign has a greater potential to affect voters' decisions.

For example, undecided voters are typically more numerous earlier rather than later in the campaign. As the campaign goes on, the information that voters acquire via news and advertisements will typically lead them to a decision. This helps explain why presidential nomination conventions, which are usually held in July or August of the election year, tend to have larger effects than the candidate debates that are usually held in late September or October.¹⁶ At the time of the conventions, some partisans may not fully support their party's nominee and the convention's hoopla helps solidify their support and perhaps also persuades some independent voters to support that candidate.¹⁷ In fact, the first of the two conventions tends to have a larger impact than the second, which suggests that the first convention solidifies enough opinions to reduce the pool of undecided voters.¹⁸ By the time the debates roll around, the pool of undecided voters has shrunk even further and, as noted earlier, voters who have made a decision will rarely change their minds after the debate because they tend to believe that their preferred candidate won. 2008 was no exception. Figure 2 presents the individual poll numbers and an average trend line for each candidate, with demarcations for various events: the announcement of the vice-presidential nominees, the conventions, the collapse of various financial institutions (Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Merrill Lynch, Lehman Brothers, and Washington Mutual), a large drop in the stock market (Dow), the candidate debates (presidential and vice-presidential), and Obama's thirty-minute television advertisement late in the campaign. The effects of the two conventions, and particularly the Republican convention, are evident in late August. By contrast, there is little movement in the polls after any of the debates.

¹⁶ James Stimson, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Daron Shaw, "A Study of Presidential Campaign Event Effects from 1952 to 1992," *Journal of Politics* 61, no. 2 (1999): 387-422.

¹⁷ D. Sunshine Hillygus and Simon Jackman, "Voter Decision Making in Election 2000: Campaign Effects, Partisan Activation, and the Clinton Legacy," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 4 (2003): 583-596.

¹⁸ Thomas M. Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996)

[insert Figure 2 about here]

Undecided voters are also more numerous in elections other than presidential general elections. Compared to presidential primaries, congressional elections (especially open-seat races), and so on, presidential general elections tend to feature candidates who are relatively familiar and about whom voters have stronger opinions. Presidential primaries often feature a large and largely unknown pool of candidates, typically Senators and governors who are familiar mostly in their home states and sometimes not even there. Moreover, voters cannot rely on party identification because all of the candidates are of the same party. This makes events during the primaries much more consequential, especially the outcomes of the earliest caucuses and primaries. In 2008, Obama's standing in the polls increased by about 20 points between the first caucus in Iowa on January 3 and the Super Tuesday primaries on February 5. This is a much larger increase than the conventions or debates have created in general elections, at least in the era of public opinion polling.

Campaign activity in congressional elections also matters. Many of these races feature a relatively well-known incumbent and a lesser-known challenger. Both incumbent and challenger campaigns can matter. Typically, the more the candidate spends, the more votes they receive. But campaign spending matters more for challengers because so few voters know them. Over time, challengers with more money to spend become better known than poorer challengers; voters are more able both to recall and to recognize their names, for example.¹⁹ And this translates into a greater chance of winning. In congressional elections from 1972-2006, no

¹⁹ Gary C. Jacobson, "Measuring Campaign Spending Effects in U.S. House Elections," in *Capturing Campaign Effects*, eds. Henry E. Brady and Richard Johnston (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 199-220; Laurel Elms and Paul M. Sniderman, "Informational Rhythms of Incumbent Dominated Congressional Elections," in *Capturing Campaign Effects*, eds. Brady and Johnston.

challenger who raised less than \$100,000 won. By contrast almost a third of those who raised at least \$1 million won.²⁰

Campaign spending is arguably even more vital for challengers in elections for state legislature, state supreme court, and city council.²¹ In these elections, which attract relatively little media coverage, voters are not likely to see, hear, or read anything about challengers unless it comes from their campaigns. Thus, campaigns can be crucial to the outcomes of such elections, even if the dollar amounts spent on them are miniscule compared to what is spent in higher-profile races.

A second factor affecting the impact of a campaign is the balance of information coming from the opposing sides. The logic here is straightforward: when the opponents have roughly the same amount of money to spend, produce similar numbers of advertisements in important media markets, and receive equivalent amounts of positive and negative news coverage, it is difficult for either one of them to gain any advantage. The net outcome of all of this campaign activity will not favor either candidate, and the polls will not move much at all. This is one reason why the polls during presidential campaigns are so static. At least until 2008, when Barack Obama chose to forego public financing and spent \$730 million to McCain's \$333 million, the presidential candidates were relatively evenly matched in resources.

It is when disparities between the candidates emerge that campaign activity can benefit the advantaged candidate. Several examples will illustrate. First, incumbent members of

²⁰ Jacobson, *Politics of Congressional Elections*, 46. Dollar amounts are in \$2006 and thus adjusted for inflation.

²¹ Anthony Gierzynski and David Breaux, "Legislative Elections and the Importance of Money," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (August 1996): 337-357; Chris W. Bonneau, "The Effects of Campaign Spending in State Supreme Court Elections," *Political Research Quarterly* 60 (2007): 489-499; Timothy B. Krebs, "The Determinants of Candidates' Vote Share and the Advantages of Incumbency in City Council Elections," *American Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 3 (July 1998): 921-935.

Congress are reelected at high rates in part because of resource disparities: the vast majority of incumbents out-spend their challengers. Second, disparities can emerge in news coverage during presidential campaigns. During a nominating convention, the party holding the convention receives a sudden increase in positive news coverage that is not counterbalanced by positive coverage of the other side.²² This disparity helps explain why conventions give parties a bump in the polls. Third, even in presidential elections, disparities in television advertising can also emerge. In 2000, Bush outspent Gore in the battleground states late in the campaign, and the resulting advantage in advertising may have cost Gore 4 points of the vote—a large number in states where the outcome was so close (e.g., Florida).²³ In 2008, Obama did better in most areas of the country than did John Kerry in 2004. But Obama did particularly well the more he outspent McCain: in counties where Obama aired 1,000 more ads than McCain, he received about 0.5% more of the vote than John Kerry did in those same counties.²⁴ This is not a massive effect, suggesting how difficult it is to persuade voters in presidential elections, but it shows how disparities in campaign resources can matter.

How Campaigns Matter

If we want to know when and where political campaigns matter, the number of undecided voters and the balance of resources among the candidates are very helpful. The next question is *how* campaigns matter. Their effects on voters can take one of four basic forms: reinforcement,

²² Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?*; Richard Johnston, Michael G. Hagen, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The 2000 Presidential Election and the Foundations of Party Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 90.

²³ Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson, *2000 Presidential Election*, 85.

²⁴ Michael M. Franz and Travis N. Ridout, “Political Advertising and Persuasion in the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Elections,” *American Politics Research* 38, no. 2 (2010): 303-329.

persuasion, priming, and mobilization. Each of these can contribute to the number of votes a candidate wins and thus to the election's outcome.

Reinforcement

Reinforcement occurs when campaigns solidify the preferences of voters. Some voters may have a natural tendency to vote for one party but still be uncertain how they will vote in some elections. Campaigns tend to bring these voters back into the partisan fold, leading them to a decision that is in line with their party identification.²⁵ Political operatives and commentators often call this activity “rallying the base,” referring to the candidate’s natural base of support. Reinforcement may be visible in polls, as voters move from the undecided column into a candidate’s camp. It may also be relatively invisible. For example, in 2008, an uncertain voter who identified as a Democrat could have told a pollster that he supported Obama but done so out of partisan habit rather than any real affinity for Obama. If the campaign reinforced this choice, however, then the voter’s answer to the pollster would not change but the sentiments underlying this answer would change a great deal—from tentative support to genuine enthusiasm. Thus, a lot of reinforcement cannot be measured with standard polls but it is certainly consequential. Candidates who cannot rally their own partisans will face especially long odds.

Persuasion

Persuasion is the most familiar campaign effect, and the one on which much popular commentary centers. It involves changing the attitudes of people, especially leading them to switch their support from one party to the other. In highly visible elections, such as presidential races, outright persuasion is not very common, thanks to the prevalence and power of the social

²⁵ Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, *The People's Choice*.

and political identities discussed earlier. In the 2008 American National Election Study, respondents were interviewed in the month before and soon after the election. Of those who supported Obama in the pre-election poll and reported voting in the election itself, 97% voted him. The same was true for McCain supporters, 94% of whom voted for him. But in less visible elections, for state-wide or local offices, persuasion and thus defections are more common.²⁶

How is it that campaigns come to persuade voters? One possibility has to do with policy issues. Voters whose views on policy are out of step with the party's platform (e.g., conservative Democrats or liberal Republicans) are more likely to defect in presidential elections, especially if they live in a battleground state that is closely contested by the candidates.²⁷ This suggests that persuasion depends at least in part on the information that campaigns convey about where the parties and candidates stand.

Another possibility is that persuasion depends on candidates' personalities or physical attractiveness. Some studies do show that these factors can affect voters' decisions. In one experiment, people shown the faces of competing candidates for only 1 second can pick the candidate who actually won the election about two-thirds of the time.²⁸ In another experiment, people were provided profiles of two opposing candidates. When an attractive picture of the first candidate was paired with an unattractive picture of the second, the attractive candidate did about 10% better than if their roles were reversed and the first candidate's picture was more unattractive.²⁹ Studies have also shown that candidates who are rated as physically attractive by

²⁶ John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Chapter 10.

²⁷ D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd G. Shields, *The Persuadable Voter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

²⁸ Alexander Todorov et al., "Inference of Competence from Faces Predict Election Outcomes," *Science* 308: 1623-1626.

²⁹ Shawn W. Rosenberg and Patrick Cafferty, "The Image and the Vote: Manipulating Voters' Preferences," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1987): 31-47.

third party observers tend to do better on Election Day.³⁰ Finally, campaigns can change perceptions of the candidates' attributes, for better or worse. In 2000, the news media's attention to exaggerated statements made by Al Gore led to a notable downturn in how honest voters perceived him to be.³¹

At the same time, other evidence suggests that personality and attractiveness may not matter all that much. For one, people's perceptions of personality—which candidate is more honest, a stronger leader, etc.—are strongly shaped by their party identification. It may be that voters' perceptions of the candidates essentially come *after* they have decided to support one of those candidates. Second, the apparent effect of attractiveness may be due to other factors entirely. Parties tend to run better-looking candidates in races they have a good chance of winning and uglier candidates in races they are unlikely to win—so the fact that better-looking candidates do better at the polls may have nothing to do with their looks.³² And there is this irony: candidate appearance would be likely to matter most in less visible races with unfamiliar candidates, but these are precisely the races in which people are less likely to know what the candidates look like.

All in all, while persuasion of voters is certainly possible under the right circumstances, it is a difficult goal for campaigns to achieve. Furthermore, attempts at persuading voters of the opposite party to defect may be costly. If a Democratic candidate broadcasts some of her more conservative positions in an attempt to persuade Republican voters, she may undermine attempts

³⁰ Chappell Lawson, et al., "Looking Like a Winner: Candidate Appearance and Electoral Success in New Democracies," *World Politics* 62(4).

³¹ Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson, *2000 Presidential Election*.

³² Matthew D. Atkinson, Ryan D. Enos, and Seth J. Hill, "Candidate Faces and Election Outcomes: Is the Face-Vote Correlation Caused by Candidate Selection?" *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 4, no. 3 (2009): 229-249.

to reinforce support among her natural Democratic base. For these reasons, in many elections, persuasion is the least prominent of the campaign effects.

Priming

Campaigns are not only about whom voters choose but *why* they choose them. Through the process of priming, campaigns can affect the criteria that voters use in making decisions. Candidates strive to make the election “about” the issues that favor them. They provide voters with information about those issues and ultimately help voters to link their own attitudes about those issues to their decisions at the ballot box.³³ The possibility of priming suggests how campaigns can matter even if elections are strongly affected by fundamental factors like the economy. The economy may not automatically be the most important criterion in voters’ minds. The candidate who is advantaged by the state of the economy—the incumbent when the economy is strong, or the challenger when the economy is weak—will want to remind people about the economy and make it a more influential criterion. By contrast, the candidate disadvantaged by the economy will want to change the subject.

The importance of priming can be illustrated with the 2000 election. The essential puzzle in this election is why Gore did not win more of the popular vote, given how well the economy was doing at the time. In the bottom panel of Figure 1, the datapoint for the 2000 election is below the diagonal line, suggesting that Gore did not do as well as the state of the economy, which was growing robustly, would have predicted. One answer to the puzzle is that Gore simply failed to remind voters of the strong economy. He was, it seems, afraid to associate himself with the Clinton administration’s record for fear that, as Clinton’s vice president, he

³³ Andrew Gelman and Gary King, “Why Are Presidential Election Campaign Polls so Variable When Votes Are so Predictable?” *British Journal of Political Science* 23, no. 4 (1993): 409-451.

would be punished for Clinton's scandals. Thus, voters did not reward him for being part of an administration that presided over an economic expansion. Gore's strategy also contrasts sharply with Obama's in 2008, which entailed continual emphasis of the weak economy. A systematic study of presidential elections since 1952 shows the importance of priming: when candidates who benefit from the fundamentals emphasize them in their campaigns, they are more likely to win than candidates who, like Gore, focus on some other issue.³⁴

Mobilization

A final way that campaigns matter involves mobilizing voters. This means helping them to register and get to the polls to vote. After all, it does not do a campaign much good if they persuade voters to support a candidate but those voters stay home on Election Day. Campaigns are increasingly interested in mobilization—sometimes referred to as get-out-the-vote (GOTV) or “the ground game,” in contrast to the “air war” of campaign advertising. By using extensive databases of information about voters, candidates can better “micro-target” those voters who are likely to support them.

How do we know that campaigns actually mobilize? A first piece of evidence: higher levels of campaign spending in gubernatorial and U.S. Senate races are associated with higher turnout, particularly in years with no presidential election on the ballot.³⁵ Second, careful experimental studies have randomly assigned households to receive non-partisan GOTV reminders during elections. These studies show that GOTV does stimulate turnout, although personal forms of contact, particularly in-person conversations, are more effective than

³⁴ Lynn Vavreck, *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

³⁵ Robert A. Jackson, “Gubernatorial and Senatorial Campaign Mobilization of Voters,” *Political Research Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (December 2002): 825-844.

impersonal forms such as mail or phone calls.³⁶ Other studies have found that campaign activity mobilizes partisans in particular: when Democrats outspend Republicans, for example, the proportion of Democrats among voters goes up.³⁷ In 2008, Obama's extensive GOTV operation appears to have mattered: in several states, Obama did better, relative to Kerry in 2004, in counties in which he had opened field offices.³⁸

These campaign effects—reinforcement, persuasion, mobilization, or priming—may all affect individual voters. Arguably even more important, however, is whether or not campaigns actually affect the outcomes. In other words, do the individual voters affected by the campaign “add up” to a number that actually makes one candidate win and the other lose? In some cases, campaign activity produces effects large enough to decide the election. A presidential campaign that successfully responds to the fundamentals does 6 points better overall.³⁹ The votes attributed to Obama field offices were sufficient to win him several states.⁴⁰ But ultimately it is harder for campaigns to change an outcome than simply to affect some individual voters. After comparing early poll numbers to the actual outcome, political scientist James Campbell finds that only 5 of 14 presidential campaigns from 1948-2000 appear to have changed the outcome.⁴¹

³⁶ Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, “The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment,” *American Political Science Review* 94 (2000): 653-663.

³⁷ Thomas M. Holbrook and Scott D. McClurg, “The Mobilization of Core Supporters: Campaigns, Turnout, and Electoral Composition in United States Presidential Elections,” *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 4 (2005): 689-703; Eric McGhee and John Sides, “What Drives Partisan Turnout?” *Political Behavior*, forthcoming.

³⁸ Seth E. Masket, “Did Obama's Ground Game Matter? The Influence of Local Field Offices during the 2008 Presidential Election,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73, no. 5 (2009): 1023-1039.

³⁹ Vavreck, *The Message Matters*.

⁴⁰ Masket, “Obama's Ground Game.”

⁴¹ James E. Campbell, “When Have Presidential Campaigns Decided Election Outcomes?” *American Politics Research* 29, no. 5 (2001): 437-460.

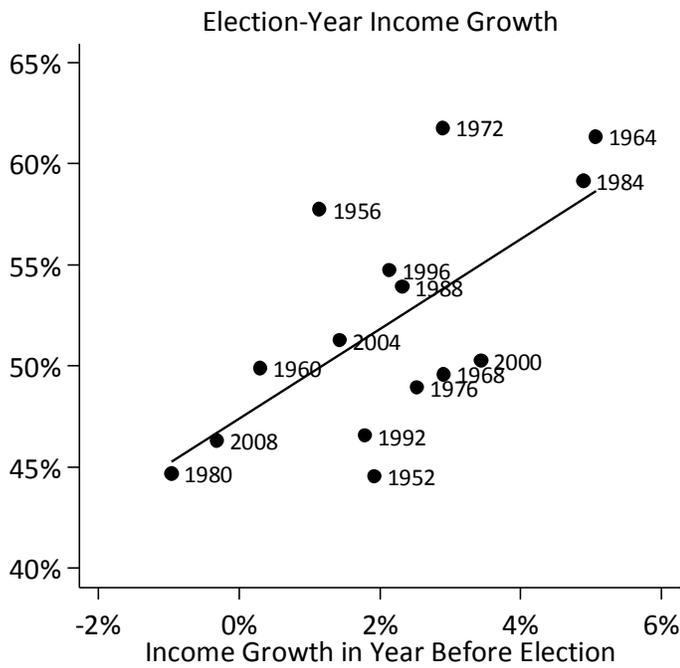
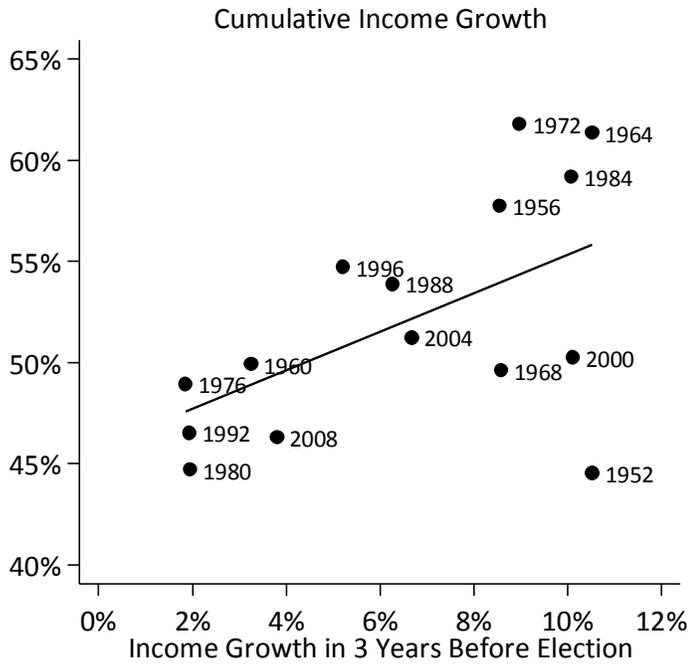
Conclusion

The news cycle demands a constant stream of fresh stories, interpretations, and analysis, and so naturally, during election season, journalists and commentators feature the twist and turns of the campaign itself. The results may make for more interesting news but they also tend to exaggerate what campaigns can really accomplish. Moreover, commentators often focus on aspects of the campaign that are particularly trivial and unlikely to affect anything, such as minor misstatements by the candidates. Instead, it is more accurate to say that campaigns can affect individual voters only when certain conditions are met—a large number of undecided voters, resource disparities among candidates—and then may not sway enough voters in a particular direction to affect the overall outcome. None of this means that campaigns are inconsequential, particularly in close races. Moreover, even their occasional impact may have big policy consequences, given the differences between what a Democratic and Republican president, governor or congressional majority will typically do while in office. But it does mean that the furious efforts of candidates often accomplish less than they would like, and certainly less than pundits perceive.

In reality, many crucial determinants of electoral outcomes lie outside of the control of candidates and campaigns. The best campaign advertising will not revive a flagging economy. The most dominant debate performance will probably fail to impress most viewers of the opposite party. The most charismatic challenger will probably have little hope of victory if the office he or she covets is currently occupied by a strong incumbent. While these realities may make following elections a less entertaining endeavor for journalists and other observers, they do point the way toward a richer understanding of what those elections are really about. Furthermore, they provide some reassurance for those concerned about the future of American

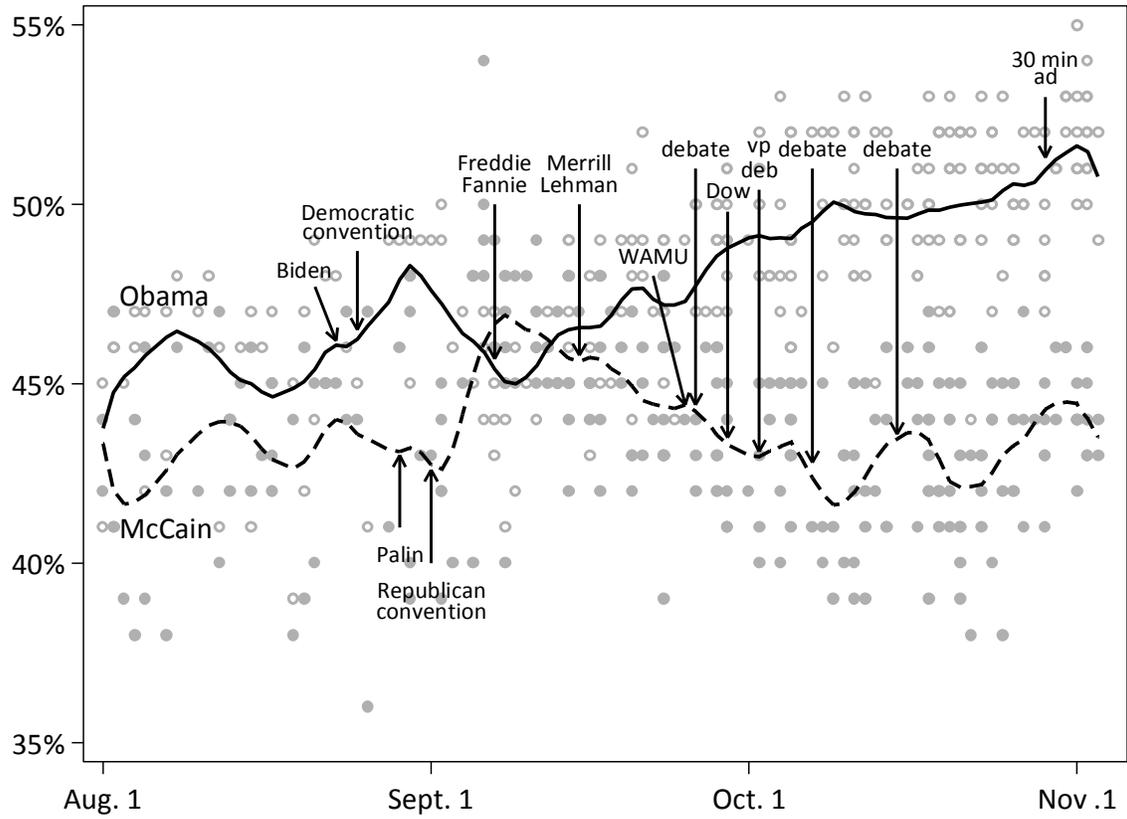
democracy in the age of media overload. While money and tactics can play a role under the right circumstances, American voters are far more than passive recipients of campaign advertising or media strategies.

Figure 1. Income Growth and Presidential Election Outcomes, 1952-2008



Sources: Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections; Bureau of Economic Analysis

Figure 2. Campaign Events and Tracking Polls in the 2008 Presidential Campaign



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