

U.S. National Elections

17.263/264

Devin Caughey

MIT Department of Political Science

Week 7: Candidates and Campaigns

Themes of the Day

- Puzzle of predictability (internal, external)
- Campaign effects (informing, priming, reinforcing, persuading, mobilizing)
- Incumbents and challengers
- Presidential and lower-level elections are different (candidates not well known and not evenly matched)

The Puzzle of Predictability

- Elections are predictable on the basis of “fundamentals”
 - Internal (e.g., PID)
 - External (e.g., economy)
- If so, why are polls so variable?
- Do campaigns matter at all?

How Campaigns Still Could Matter

Even if elections were completely predictable, campaigns could still matter by:

- Informing voters about the fundamentals (“enlightening”)
- Having large but counterbalancing effects
 - Assumes optimal campaign, even resources

But elections are **not** entirely predictable

Campaign Effects

Campaigns can affect outcomes in the following ways:

- Reinforcement (bringing partisans back to the fold)
- Persuasion (issues, attributes)
- Priming (criteria of evaluation)
- Mobilization (convince supporters to vote)

Presidential Campaign Strategies

- **Clarifying Campaign:** Candidate advantaged by fundamentals (prosperity, peace) emphasizes (primes) those issues and clarifies his connection to them
 - Examples: Johnson in 1964, Reagan in 1984
 - Counterexample: Gore in 2000
- **Insurgent Campaign:** Disadvantaged candidate emphasizes issue on which their have an advantage and which their opponent's position is unpopular
 - Winners: Kennedy (1960), Nixon (1968), Carter (1976), Bush (2000)
 - Losers: Stevenson, Goldwater (1964), Dole (1996),...

Dynamics of Presidential Campaigns

- Early polls not very accurate
- Over time, polls become
 - less variable (fewer swing voters)
 - more even
 - more accurate and closer to forecast (informing)
- Some campaign effects persist (“bump”) while others dissipate (“bounce”)
- Short-term campaign effects can still matter if occur late
→ deluge of late ads

Presidential vs. Lower-Level Elections

- Presidential candidates generally well matched (skills, resources)
- Not true of lower-level campaigns, such as House of Representatives
 - Larger incumbency advantage
 - familiarity, resources, selection, strategic entry
 - \$\$ matters more for challengers

How Do Politicians “See” Their Constituency?

- Concentric circles: geographic, re-election, primary, personal
- “Home style” \implies trust (slack)
 - Personality but also district (esp. if homogenous)
- Incumbency advantage despite congressional unpopularity
- Run for Congress by running *against* Congress

Do Campaigns Matter?

- Affect outcomes, esp. if candidates not well known (e.g., primaries, open seats) or resources are unequal
- We don't observe “non-optimal” behavior very often
- Campaigns affect candidates
 - Learn from voters, challengers

Obama vs. Romney

- What kind of campaign has each run?
- How has race evolved over the campaign?
- Who has run a better campaign?
- Who is going to win?

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