

THE CAMPAIGN IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Presidential elections in the United States involve significant choices for millions of Americans and in some way affect nearly everyone else on earth. That is why, in my article, I would like to concentrate on the mechanics of the presidential campaign. Firstly, in order to examine the campaign rule, I am going to discuss how voters decide whom to support. In this part, I will focus on the effects of party identification in presidential election. Secondly, my paper will include data about the campaign organization and its practical concerns. I would like to concentrate on factors like: the importance of the Primary Election, being Challengers and Incumbents, states chosen to campaign, which appear to be vital for the campaigning. Subsequently, the importance of candidate presentation will be described. Thirdly, I am going to examine closely the role of mass media in modern elections. This part will also include the description of the first presidential debate shown on TV, namely the debate between R.M. Nixon and J.F. Kennedy in 1960. Later, I will examine the influence of the television advertising campaign on the example of J.M. Dukakis failure in 1988. Finally, I will try to trace where campaign dollars go. At the end, the financing of the campaign after the post-Watergate reforms will be discussed.

WHAT DETERMINES THE VOTERS' CHOICE

How voters decide whom to support is one of the most important features that are to be considered while planning the campaign. One of the most remarkable phenomena of American election system is the importance of party identification. 70% of voters are supporters of a particular party and will have decided how to vote before the candidates are even chosen.¹ As 60% of these party regulars are Democrats, this party stresses civic obligation to vote to get as large turnout as possible. Therefore, for Republicans involved in presidential nominating politics, the most important is to devise a strategy that could help them to win regardless of the fact that they are from minority party. Even in this reasonably competitive two-party system, this is their chronic difficulty. Although, in 1980, the Republicans did so well in electing R. Regan over J. Carter that it was widely assumed that a long last party realignment was about to occur, still this idea proved to be quite wrong. On the other hand, increasing proportion of citizens – approximately 30% – consider themselves politically independent. That is why, the candidates are more and more frequently focusing on influencing them. Independent voters may be fundamentally concern about issues like abortion, environment, economic growth or health care.²

¹ E.J. Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1991, p. 97.

² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

PRIMARY ELECTION

Officially campaigning begins on Labor Day. From that day, two presidential candidates confront the voters directly. Still, unofficially it starts much earlier. By late 1940 New Hampshire had unofficially gained the first importance in forecasting the outcome of the presidential elections, though officially it has no importance. The strength of forecasting from those first voting results in the presidential election was and is immense as it has been giving the early signal about voters' opinion. In 1952 in New Hampshire presidential primary election H. Truman, having obtained 48% of votes, decided to withdraw from the presidential election. In 1968 Johnson decided not to run as E. McCarthy had done there so well. The first voting results in the primaries has also a determining affect on financing of the campaign (what will be discussed later). For it significant influence, in 27 months to voting there are already people going to New Hampshire to talk to voters, to influence them and to generate some interest.

THE CAMPAIGN

Challengers and Incumbents

Incumbency stands out as a determining factor in the campaign. It is one of the dominating consideration as the challenger may not be well known and may find that much of his effort must be devoted to publicizing himself. The president, on the contrary, is getting free publicity by the things he does. Gerald Ford's chief of staff in 1976 admitted this made things easy for his candidate. He said:

"We played to television's problems. We knew that their measures of fair treatment was equal time. So we would go out in the Rose Garden and say nothing – just sign the bill – and we would get coverage."³

On the other hand, the major advantage the challenger possesses is his ability to criticize policies freely, whereas the incumbent is often restrain by his current official responsibilities.

Organizing the Campaign

While the incumbent has a going, tested organization, the challenger has to build one as he goes along the campaign. These special group organizations work on the details of the election, supervise and spread work. All candidates seek special volunteer organizations to help attract voters. Candidates and their advisers must recruit workers – usually volunteers – to make sure their candidate will win their vote on election day. Still, as the mechanics of electioneering are not simple matter, they can not be entrusted wholly to amateurs. The organization need to prepare various speaking arrangements on time, gather the information about the audience and from that perspective prepare to suggest the most appropriate approach. For these tasks, the professionals are employed.⁴

³ N. Polsby, A. Wildavsky, *Presidential Elections, Strategies of American Electoral Politics*, Washington 1992 sixth edition, p. 162.

⁴ E. Fiedler, *America in Close-Up*, Longman 1990, p. 65.

Where to Campaign

Apart from good organization, there are also other features that are to be considered while running for the election. The candidates know that it is not votes as such that matter, but rather electoral votes, which are counted on a state-by-state basis. That is why, for the successful campaign it is of vital importance to define where to campaign. It is advisable, for example, to campaign in states with large electoral votes. There is no much point, however, in campaigning in states where would-be-presidents know they are bound to win or lose. Thus, the best is to campaign in the states with large electoral votes which are doubtful – where is a good chance for either party to win. Skill and strategy in using resources matters as much as having them. Namely:

"In 1976, B. Bayh's indiscretion about entering primaries, H. Jackson's taking Pennsylvania for granted, J. Carter's failing to see Maryland was not for him and getting involved in a pointless scrap with Governor J. Brown of California, all this and more mattered."⁵

Getting favorable results on the voting day, may depend to some extent on how the voters regard would-be-president, how communicative he is, how well he deals with special interest groups.

Candidate Presentation

Regardless of the fact that a candidate is required to be 35 years old, he is helped by being 50–59 years old (however J.F. Kennedy was 45), and most favorable – being male and Protestant. It is also more advisable to run from a big state, as for example, there is only 1 vote from Maine (1mln citizens) and 54 from California (35 mln). That is how, the presidential election has been dominated by candidates from big states (for instance: G. Bush, F.D. Roosevelt, R.M. Nixon). It is believed to help a lot, if a would-be president is thought of as trustworthy, mature, kind but firm etc. Candidates try to smooth off the rough edges and to create their public image. Some of them are not far from remodeling their entire personality towards public demands. Kennedy, who was accused of being young and immature, restyled his youthful style of hair, Nixon thinned his eyebrows to look less threatening J. Carter shared some intimate revelations to show he was not cold and calculating but sincere. R. Regan smiled a lot when J. Carter tried to portray him as dangerous.⁶ Although to publicize themselves, many candidates prefer personal appearances at festivals, parades, or annual county fairs, still they highly value the influence of media.

Media

Getting favorable coverage in newspapers is advisable and important for a candidate. It has to be pinpointed, however, that the press does not so strongly influence readers' opinion as television. With TV occupying an important place in American life, ability to make a good appearance is not a trivial matter. Television is a considerably influential mean of reaching voters directly. That is why, would-be-presidents use it in numerous ways. Firstly, like it was mentioned before, the incumbent can

⁵ L. Berman, *The New American Presidency*, Boston: Little Brown and Company 1992, p. 187.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.190.

create news events, which helps him to gather public attention as even mere space in the media may be determining. Secondly, candidates use paid TV advertisement, which appear to be of overwhelming importance. They turned out to be markedly influential in the instance of J.M. Dukakis' campaign. As he was against strong imprisonment, his opponent showed the add where fierce-looking criminals were let out off prison. This vision strongly appealed to the viewers and it played the major role in J.M. Dukakis' failure. Apart from these alternatives, would-be presidents can be given free time broadcasting. According to the 'Equal Time Rule' neither TV nor radio stations can provide free time broadcasting for candidates for president without providing the same amount of time for every other candidate. As a result, opportunities provided by television debates tempt candidates.

Television Debates

Televised debates provide a unique instance in which huge numbers of people attracted to both parties could be expected to tune in attentively. Making a favorable impression could convince a lot of people. The famous TV debate of 1960 between R.M. Nixon and J.F. Kennedy provide an excellent illustration of the difficulty the candidates may face.⁷ Kennedy issued a challenge to debate on television. Among J.F. Kennedy's greatest problems in the campaign were his youth and charges of inexperience. What is more, despite the reams of publicity he had received, he was much less known than vice-president. Here was an opportunity to prove his knowledge, administrative skills and to increase his visibility. R.M. Nixon was in more difficult position. Saying 'no' would subjected him as being afraid to face opposition. R.M. Nixon was well prepared for the debate, but he miscalculated the role vision played for the television audience. His answers were straight and clear, but he seemed hesitant, insincere (not looking straight at the camera), nervous, not paying attention to J.F. Kennedy's speech (as he was moving anxiously, glancing at his watch). Surveys taken after the event showed that TV audience claimed J.F. Kennedy to be better, whereas radio audience opinion was more favorable for Nixon. It proved that Kennedy appeared on the screen much better. The election of 1964 presented entirely different circumstances. President L. Johnson, not a handsome man, had nothing to gain and everything to lose by debating his rival. And so, none were held. In 1968 H. Humphrey pursued R.M. Nixon on this point, but not surprisingly R.M. Nixon refused both in that year and in 1972. Then, observers were beginning to question whether candidates would ever again seek a confrontation. Still, the television debates tempt candidates as an opportunity to win a lot, to prove their administrative skills, and to increase their visibility. That is why, despite the risk, many candidates have been challenged. Public debates have been occurring regularly since 1976.

Low Voters Turnout

Although every citizen has the right to vote, the percentage of the voting age population that participates in election is quite low. Voters turnout in presidential election is usually under 60 percent. Several factors may contribute to these differences in

⁷ T. Rosentiel, *Watch it on TV*, Feb. 12, 1996 Newsweek.

voter participation. K. Janda⁸ suggested grouping explanations in categories. One of them stresses *barriers to voting*. Unlike most of the other nations, the United States requires early voter registration. Many Americans do not register to vote. In many instances, it appears to be due to the juridical system that requires citizens to act as a jury in the court. The jury is chosen from the registration list. To omit serving in a jury some of the citizens do not register. Moreover, American elections are always held on Tuesdays, a normal working day, whereas elections in many other nations are held on weekends. Yet, second explanation is *demographic*. An expanded electorate now embraces segments of the population with traditionally low voting rates – young voters, blacks, and Hispanics. Finally, citizens may be abandoning voting for other forms of participation in politics, including membership in political groups and activism on issues. Still, as K. Janda⁹ puts it:

"High turnover of members does not seem to be required for Government to be a responsive institution. (...) Popular control of policy makers is not the same thing as popular control of policies themselves."

The United States Constitution established a system in which the people have the right, whether they exercise it or not, to influence the direction of government.

One of the most striking features of presidential elections is the discrepancy between low voters turnout and financing of the campaign. The percentage of the voting age population that participates in election is quite low – 40% of people do not vote, whereas 63% of money for the campaign is donated by individuals. What is more,

"...contrary to frequent assertion, American campaign moneys are not supplied solely by small handful of fat cats. Many millions of people now give to politics. Even those who give several hundreds dollars each number in tens of thousands".¹⁰

Money, however, is a prime consideration as campaigning is extraordinary expensive.

Campaign Spending

So, where do campaign dollars go? According to N. Polsby,¹¹ mainly to radio and television – radio and television appearances, newspaper advertising are terribly expensive. A lot of is spent on candidate's and his entourage travels. A vast part of funds go to organizations – salaries, office supplies, printing and telephones. Mailing, taking polls, buttons and placards all cost a great deal of money. Total political costs for all candidates at all levels of government amounted to \$1.2 billion in 1980. This huge costs involved inevitably raise question about gathering such incredible amount of money.

⁸ K. Janda, *The Challenge of Democracy*, New York: Mifflin Inc. 1989.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁰ N. Polsby, A. Wildavsky, *Presidential Elections, Strategies of American Electoral Politics*, op.cit., p. 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

The Financing of the Campaign

There was the evidence that presidential elections used to be unduly influenced by monied interest. The victorious president used to be under obligation to 'pay off'. This was certainly the reason that inspired the post-Watergate reforms. The Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments of 1974,¹² were explicitly designed to reduce the influence of money in the electoral process. The elaborate limitation of funding were established. After the reforms of mid-1970s, federal contributions are available to contestants in primary elections, on a matching basis, as they are able to gather bonus (small checks from people spread around a variety of states, each giving less than 1000\$). The federal government will hold this bonus up to the couple of first Primary election. The candidate who gets less than 5% of votes in 2 primary votes is believed not to be a serious candidate. And so, the candidates is not supposed to run any longer, what is more, the federal government gets money given to him and financially supports more serious candidates. During the presidential election campaign the major parties can get more than \$20 million each from the public funds. They may forego this sum if they choose to do so and opt for private financing instead. In other words, the funds are available to the candidates of the two parties provided they do not collect or disburse money from any other source. It is likely, however, that they will settle for the public. If they do, they cannot also raise money privately, and this release from private fund raising is a blessing few presidential nominees are likely to reject. They may also suspect that choosing private financing would alienate some voters. Again, minor parties are eligible on a proportionate basis, depending on the votes they received at the last general election, so long as they obtained a minimum of 5% of the vote.¹³ This funding system has two major results. Firstly, it forces candidates IN or OUT and eliminates not successful candidates – it is designed to get rid of the unimportant challengers. By the 5th or 6th weeks of Primary there are only 2 or 3 candidates left. Secondly, the results in the early primary elections determine a party nominee, who is then financially supported by the party.

Still candidates have to raise their own resources, and put together their own campaign organizations. Whether there was any limit of how much of his own money the candidate can spend on his own election was questioned by US Senator B. Buckley. Since the Supreme Court decided that every citizen can spend his money as he wishes, it has not been restricted by any law, how much of his own money candidate may spend. That is why, it is advisable to be rich or to have wealthy spouses. Candidates who lack funds may be disadvantaged. However on the other hand, given the necessary minimum amount of money, the less-affluent candidate can count on a good deal of free publicity. Presidential campaigns are deemed newsworthy by the news media and are extensively reported. Since 1974 this federal election funds have been established and the two major parties are entitled to draw upon it in equal amounts to finance the conduct of their general election presidential campaigns. Under this system, for example, each major party spent

¹² E.J. Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1991, p. 154.

¹³ N. Polsby, A. Wildavsky, *Presidential Elections, Strategies of American Electoral Politics*, op.cit., p. 64.

\$ 34 million in 1980, which is not an overwhelming sum.¹⁴ Finally, I would like to stress that even in the era, when the parties were free to spend whatever they could raise, money did not buy election victories. Although it was a substantial campaign plus, the candidates and party with the most money did not always win (needless to say that Republican party always outspends the Democrats).

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¹⁴ Ibid., p. 64.