Collecting to the Core — U.S. Presidential Campaigns

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Column Editor's Note: *The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the* ***Resources for College Libraries*** *bibliography (online at* ***http://www.rclweb.net****). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — **AD***

In the early 1940s, **Paul Lazarsfeld** and several colleagues at **Columbia University** embarked on a series of landmark studies to investigate how people decide whom to vote for in U.S. presidential elections. In contrast to the popular focus emphasizing political strategy and pivotal events, decisions, or gaffes along the campaign trail, **Lazarsfeld** concluded in *The People's Choice* that while people hesitate and meditate and imagine that they decide rationally on the better road to take, it would have often been possible to predict at the outset what they would decide to do in the end. Knowing a few of their personal characteristics, we can tell with fair certainty how they will finally vote: they join the fold to which they belong…a person thinks, politically, as he is, socially. Social characteristics determine political preference.[1]

In the decades following, numerous other research studies confirmed **Lazarsfeld's** conclusion that voters' sociodemographic predispositions, especially partisan identification, strongly condition their vote choice.

However, **Lazarsfeld's** view that voters merely "imagine that they decide rationally" was too strong. As **V. O. Key** countered in *The Responsible Electorate*, "voters are not fools… the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it."[2] This insight — that voters are rational but operate in an environment of limited information — led **Key** to an important intuition: voters treat elections as referenda on the incumbent party's policies and performance. "As voters mark their ballots they may have in their minds impressions of the last TV political spectacular of the campaign, but, more important, they have in their minds recollections of their experiences of the past four years."[3] Later work made it clear that voters give particular weight to the performance of the national economy in these retrospective evaluations.[4]

But why should voters care about what happened in the past rather than evaluating candidates on the merits of their proposed policies and plans? The answer, **Samuel Popkin** argued in *The Reasoning Voter*, is that voters engage in "low-information rationality" when voting. Because voters have little detailed knowledge about politics and policies "and a limited understanding of how governmental actions are connected to consequences of immediate concern to them," they rely on information shortcuts to help them make voting decisions.[5] Since voters have difficulty anticipating the effects of proposed policies or how leaders will actually govern once elected, they use shortcuts like party identification and evaluations of the incumbent party's management of the economy to provide relevant information to fill in the gaps.

The reliance of voters on these cues to guide vote choices led to a recognition among political scientists that presidential elections could be predicted on the basis of these "fundamentals," as they came to be known. Indeed, by the early 1990s, scholars had developed forecasting models that, relying on a handful of indicators like partisan identification, recent GDP growth, and presidential approval, were able to predict the outcomes of presidential elections within a percentage point or two.[6-7] The natural conclusion these strands of research pointed to was the "minimal effects" thesis of U.S. presidential campaigns: if elections are so predictable, then campaigns must not matter all that much.

But that conclusion didn't sit well with many researchers. After all, if campaigns don't really matter, how do we explain the inordinate amount of time, attention, effort, and money poured into them (more than $2.3 *billion* on the 2012 presidential race alone)?[8] One answer is that campaigns are not *in*effective, just *equally* effective. In our high-stakes, two-party system, the effects of two well-matched, well-funded campaigns largely cancel each other out. Like a game of tug-of-war, if one side lets go, the other side easily wins. "But of course the candidates do not let go and that makes it hard to see that their efforts are making a difference."[9]

Another answer, it turns out, is to reframe the question. Instead of asking, "Do campaigns matter?" researchers decided to ask, "When and in what ways do campaigns matter?" This question has generated a large body of research, establishing that campaigns do indeed matter. Several key ideas have emerged from this recent work.

First, scholars agree that the "fundamentals," those "national conditions that set the stage for the campaign" — such as the state of the economy, the balance of partisan leanings, and presidential approval — are major, but not absolute, determinants of voter choice.[10] Drawing on a rolling survey of over 57,000 voters (most nationally representative surveys have fewer than 3,000 respondents), **Kate Kenski** and her colleagues were able to test a host of different potential influences on voters' choices for president in 2008. In *The Obama Victory: How Media, Money, and Message Shaped the 2008 Election*, their analysis shows that fundamentals account for about 80 percent of the variance in voter's choice of candidate.[11] That's quite significant, but it leaves room for influence, and in close elections a little bit of influence can make all the difference. And anyway, to state the obvious, candidates still have to compete to win. Even though "the outcome can typically be foreseen from the fundamentals of the campaign…surprises are possible….Just as in baseball, the season must be played out to determine who wins."[12]

Second, recent work has made clear that campaigns fulfill an important role in enabling voter learning. Since most voters have limited political knowledge and interest, campaign events and messaging serve to drum up interest in politics and enlighten voters about the character, competence, and policy positions of candidates. As **Popkin** notes, "campaign" is a military term and an apt metaphor, because candidates "must engage their political opponents in a series of battles conducted in full view of their countrymen, who will judge each contest. To arouse public opinion and generate support for their cause, they must defend old policies, sell new policies, and justify their rule."[13] And like other spectator sports, these public battles activate latent loyalties and mobilize support, effectively sorting voters into competing teams rooting for their champion.

This metaphor is also useful for highlighting two related points that run against commonly held beliefs about campaigns. First, many people deplore the mudslinging and negative attacks so ubiquitous to campaigning. However, as **John Geer** argues in his *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*, negativity in campaigns is a vital part of the democratic process.[14] Candidates have an incentive to expose shortcomings in their opponents' character, competence, and policies and to respond to attacks against them in turn. This competitive dynamic increases the availability and quality of information available to voters (for example, most candidates rarely release tax returns without being challenged to do so). To extend the battle metaphor, you can't win a boxing match without throwing a

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punch. Furthermore, how you fight can be just as informative — if you throw a lot of punches below the belt, you may get away with it, but you risk turning the crowd against you.

Another common belief is to proclaim this or that event (say, **Romney's** 47 percent comment or **Obama's** performance in the first presidential debate in 2012) to be a "game-changer." In *The Timeline of Presidential Elections: How Campaigns Do (and Do Not) Matter*, **Robert Erikson** and **Christopher Wlezien** analyze all the national presidential election polls from 1952 to 2008 (more than 2000 of them) to determine how voter preferences evolve over the timeline of the presidential campaign. They find that vote choice slowly coalesces throughout the election year. While political ads and other campaign events may affect voters' candidate preferences, most of the effects disappear quickly without leaving a trace, like ripples from a pebble tossed into a river. There are two exceptions, though. The first involves the national nominating conventions, which are major spectacles that engage and inform large numbers of voters, help activate and cement latent party loyalties, and mobilize supporters. The other exception is short-term movements of opinion in the final two weeks of the campaign that affect the vote before their effect wears off. But the scope for such last-minute movements is limited, "as remarkably few voters change their minds over the course of the campaign."[15] Again the battle metaphor is instructive — most events of the campaign are glancing blows, not knockout punches, but sometimes landing a few glancing blows at the end of a match can be enough to have it called in your favor.

The third major lesson from the recent campaign literature is that the messages campaigns choose to focus on make a difference. In *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns*, **Lynn Vavreck** applies the lessons of "low-information rationality" to campaign strategy.[16] In choosing a candidate to match their preferred positions on issues, voters face uncertainty about the relative importance of different policies, about where a candidate stands on an issue, and about how certain they are that the candidate actually holds the position he or she professes. Candidates thus engage in three distinct behaviors that inform voters. By talking repeatedly about certain issues (a process called priming), candidates attempt to focus the agenda of elections onto issues favorable to them. They also attempt to persuade voters that they hold specific positions — or that their opponents do — and to clarify their positions on important issues, primarily the economy (which is the best issue because it's always clear which side to be on — "everyone prefers prosperity to decline").[17] Ultimately, this leads to two dominant strategies for candidates, depending on whether the fundamentals favor them or not—either they run a clarifying campaign to emphasize "their role in fostering the good economic times or their lack of a role in bringing about bad times" or they run an insurgent campaign, which attempts to refocus the election off the economy and onto a popular issue that "directly exploit[s] the weaknesses or constraints of their opponents." In other words, if you can't use "it's the economy stupid," then you'd better change the subject. Testing her theory against the fifteen presidential elections from 1952 to 2008, **Vavreck** concludes that the "impressive relationship between citizens and national economic context can be intensified if candidates choose to talk about the economy in their campaigns," but "candidates' rhetoric about other issues can drive out the importance of the economy if they choose the right issue. The structural conditions matter, but they can be overcome."[18]

Many questions remain about precisely in what ways and for whom campaigns matter. For example, while there's general agreement that a small segment of the population in any given election can be swayed from one side to the other (perhaps as much as 20 percent, but likely less than 10 percent), there's much disagreement about which voters are most persuadable. Most of the literature has argued, following **Lazarsfeld**, that voters with the least political knowledge and interest are the most persuadable, since they can benefit the most from the informational effects of campaigns. However, others have argued that campaigns frequently use "wedge" issues to try to target and win over knowledgeable partisans who have strong preferences on an issue that diverges from their party's candidate (for example, in 2004 Democrats tried to use the issue of stem cell research to attract the votes of Republicans who disagreed with Bush's stance against it).[19] Another question of increasing relevance to campaign researchers concerns the issue of "microtargeting" — the ability of campaigns to leverage technology and vast databases of information on voters to send messages and appeals finely tuned to various constituencies, say 45 to 55-year-old white, female, college-educated Democrats making more than $120,000 a year in Princeton, New Jersey. There is much we don't know about how these groups are selected, what kinds of messages are targeted to them, and how effective the appeals are.

But with all that we know (or don't know) about campaigns, perhaps one lesson is most worth remembering in this election season: "the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented to them....If the people can choose only from among rascals, they are certain to choose a rascal."[20]

Endnotes

1. **Lazarsfeld, Paul F., Bernard Berelson,** and **Hazel Gaudet.** *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign.* 3rd ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968: 73, 27.*
2. **Key, V.O.** *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936-1960.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966: 7, 2.*
3. Ibid, 8–9.
4. **Fiorina, Morris P.** *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.
5. **Popkin, Samuel L.** *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991: 8.*
6. **Lewis-Beck, Michael S.,** and **Tom W. Rice.** *Forecasting Elections.* Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 1992.
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8. **Magleby, David B.** *Financing the 2012 Election.* Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2014: 1.*
9. **Sides, John,** and **Lynn Vavreck.** *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election.* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013: 9.*
10. Ibid, 2.
11. **Kenski, Kate, Bruce Hardy,** and **Kathleen Hall Jamieson.** *The Obama Victory: How Media, Money, and Message Shaped the 2008 Election.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.*
12. **Erickson, Robert S.,** and **Christopher Wlezien.** *The Timeline of Presidential Elections: How Campaigns Do (and Do Not) Matter.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012: 3.
13. **Popkin,** *Reasoning Voter*, 8.
14. **Geer, John G.** *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.*
15. **Erickson** and **Wlezien,** *Timeline of Presidential Elections*, 16.
16. **Vavreck, Lynn.** *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns.* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.*
17. Ibid, 30.
18. Ibid, 159–60.
19. **Hillygus, D. Sunshine,** and **Todd G. Shields.** *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns.* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008: 2-4.*
20. **Key,** *Responsible Electorate*, 2-3.

*Editor's note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

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digital skills as well as provide comfortable reading and working spaces. A couple of points that specifically interested me. **Americans are divided on a fundamental question about how books should be treated at libraries:** 24% support the idea of moving books and stacks in order to make way for more community- and tech-oriented spaces, while 31% say libraries should not move the books to create such spaces. About four-in-ten think libraries should maybe consider doing so.

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