

5.10 Modern Campaigns

Explain how campaign organizations and strategies affect the election process.

The structure and function of election campaigns have changed with the times. As the process of electing candidates to government office has grown more democratic so too have campaign strategies changed. Technology as well has required campaigns to “use 21st century tools to assimilate lessons from 19th century politics.”

Historically, the political parties ran national and local campaigns. Party elites chose the candidates, funded their campaigns and orchestrated election strategies. For most of our early political history the candidates themselves were not even seen on the campaign trail. But as new technologies emerged in the early twentieth century, like radio and film, so too new election techniques were developed. Candidate centered campaigns began to replace party control over elections. Weakened parties had its problems. Candidates still needed help running their marketing campaigns. Professional campaign consultants filled this vacuum.

Becoming ever more important in the modern era, campaign consultants have emerged as a robust industry of professionals and experts. They bring discipline and direction to candidates and their campaigns. Political scientists agree that a campaign consultant is,

...A professional who is engaged primarily in the provision of advice and services, such as polling, media, creation and production, and direct mail fundraising, to candidates, their campaigns and other political committees.

Consultants have been called “the middle men of politics.” Often, they are referred to as “handlers.” The modern campaign demands much more than a few whistle-stops and posters. Handlers coordinate advance work, scheduling, speech writing, media, polling, finance and spin. Running a campaign is now a career choice.

Campaigns are unthinkable without a stable of professional campaign consultants. As a result, our election campaigns have grown more sophisticated and more expensive. With handlers ever present, the blur between policy and politics is ever apparent. Presidential handlers have been called “the most powerful political figures America has never heard of.” Electability once anchored on character, with modern day marketers handling candidates, winning now depends more on likeability. With a voyeuristic media and a savvy electorate, candidates need to be cautious of their image at all times. They need proper handlers.

The structure and function of the modern campaign is different for another reason as well. Not only have campaign consultants changed our politics but so too has new technology. Sasha Issenberg in *Victory Lab* (2012) detailed how new digital metrics and high-tech analytics have changed the modern political campaign:

The Obama 2012 campaign used data analytics and the experimental method to assemble a winning coalition vote by vote. In doing so, it overturned the long dominance of TV advertising in U.S. politics and created something new in the world; a national campaign run like a local ward

election, where the interests of individual voters were known and addressed.

Crunching data, however, is not the only way technology is being used to win political offices today. Door-to-door canvassers can now find walk sheets without reporting to a campaign office. Everything can be coordinated online. Volunteer activities have now been gamified. Campaign workers compete online against other campaign workers. Social media can be used to micro-target prospective voters. Issenberg claimed,

Obama's campaign began the election year confident it knew the name of every one of the 69,456,897 Americans whose vote had put him in the White House.

Get out the vote (GOTV) activity, once considered an art, has now become a science. So, it can be said of our politics. The modern election campaign looks more and more like selling a product on the shelf. We market our candidates like we sell the latest fashion accessory. Technology allows the process to go digital and mobile. We once talked about local political machines running the neighborhoods. Today modern machines seemingly run our politics in new and sophisticated ways. To say we have virtually transformed our democracy can now be taken literally.

Remember candidate characteristics continue to take on an ever more important role. Candidate-centered campaigns can now be seen as a game changer. As our nominating process has become more democratic with the rise of direct primaries, individual candidates make direct appeals to voters. Technology advancements as well help explain how candidate characteristics are more and more important. Radio, television and the Internet all provide greater intimacy between candidate and voter. We no longer need Party bosses to filter candidates. We assess competency and character for ourselves. Voters now demand to see their candidates on TV talk shows, up close in town hall meetings and even as guests on popular entertainment outlets. Our candidates now create viral videos, they Tweet and use Instagram. Voters now increasingly make visceral decisions based on personal preference rather than simply relying on elites. This allows for a new type of candidate, often unfiltered and more extreme.

There are both benefits and drawbacks to candidate-centered campaigns.

Candidate centered campaigns have led to an increased dependence on professional consultants. Political handlers are paid to market candidates like any other product in the market place. Consultants come with a variety of talents and expertise. Some bring vision, others specialize in polling, while others know how to raise money or create catchy slogans and catch phrases. TV ads are created to sell personality, likeability, authenticity and most importantly electability. Images have increasingly outplayed content. Consultants often come with little to no ties to party traditions, wishes and protocols. The dependence upon professional consultants clearly reflects the weakening of political parties in our electoral process. For some weakened political parties is a benefit but to others a drawback.

Candidate centered campaigns have also given rise to campaign costs and intensive fundraising efforts. Now that the political parties no longer play the role of financial conduit, candidate centered campaigns must spend tremendous energies raising monies on their own. Campaign finance rules do not make this easy. A few billionaire friends cannot bank role a campaign. Candidates are required to raise nickels and dimes each and every day. Even if

fortunate to win the election, this glad-handing needs to continue. With campaign independence, however, candidates are now able to choose their own consultants, media experts and speechwriters. The modern political campaign now requires tremendous resources to build a winning personal following. Some critics see money as the root of all that is wrong in our politics. Others, however, delight in watching the ways in which the American people get engaged in politics, even with their check books.

Election cycles in American politics have grown longer and longer. Many political scientists speak of “the permanent campaign.” Some blame candidate centered campaigns. It takes longer to raise the large sums of money required to run a national campaign. Name recognition also takes time. Today’s candidates need more time to build winning teams of consultants, media mavens and pollsters. Campaigns also require more time to meet the candidates. We now expect many debates, town hall meetings and guest spots on TV and radio. Candidate centered campaigns help to explain why our political season appears to be every season.

The modern candidate centered campaign has also witnessed the impact of and reliance on social media for communications and fundraising. Viral videos and viral marketing now play an important role in campaign agenda setting. All campaigns now use Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and Snap chat. The rise of social media along with the rise of personal followings in politics is no coincidence. Political science suggests:

The rise of social media platforms is interlinked with heightened processes of individualization. The experience of increased personal autonomy and expressions of this are among the most debated trends in our time...In accounts of the late modern era, processes of individualization are given priority over collectively shared cultural frames of references that dominated social spaces and their organization in modernity (such as family, nation, class, party affiliation et cetera).

As we engage more and more via modern technologies so too is our politics framed less by traditional linkage institutions and more through social media outlets. An individualized process goes hand-in-hand with a more individualized candidate. This has resulted in greater access to new forms of political participation. Social media has also created new ways for campaigns to tap into fresh sources of revenue.

When assessing candidate centered campaigns political scientists and voters alike have recognized both benefits and drawbacks.