7.5: Campaigns and Voting

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Compare campaign methods for elections
- Identify strategies campaign managers use to reach voters
- Analyze the factors that typically affect a voter’s decision

Campaign managers know that to win an election, they must do two things: reach voters with their candidate’s information and get voters to show up at the polls. To accomplish these goals, candidates and their campaigns will often try to target those most likely to vote. Unfortunately, these voters change from election to election and sometimes from year to year. Primary and caucus voters are different from voters who vote only during presidential general elections. Some years see an increase in younger voters turning out to vote. Elections are unpredictable, and campaigns must adapt to be effective.

FUNDRAISING

Even with a carefully planned and orchestrated presidential run, early fundraising is vital for candidates. Money helps them win, and the ability to raise money identifies those who are viable. In fact, the more money a candidate raises, the more he or she will continue to raise. EMILY’s List, a political action group, was founded on this principle; its name is an acronym for “Early Money Is Like Yeast” (it makes the dough rise). This group helps progressive women candidates gain early campaign contributions, which in turn helps them get further donations (Figure).
EMILY's List candidates include members of Congress, such as Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) (a), and governors, such as Maggie Hassan (b) of New Hampshire, who both ran for U.S. Senate, and won, in 2016. (credit b: modification of work by Roger H. Goun)

Early in the 2016 election season, several candidates had fundraised well ahead of their opponents. Hillary Clinton, Jeb Bush, and Ted Cruz were the top fundraisers by July 2015. Clinton reported $47 million, Cruz with $14 million, and Bush with $11 million in contributions. In comparison, Bobby Jindal and George Pataki (who both dropped out relatively early) each reported less than $1 million in contributions during the same period. Bush later reported over $100 million in contributions, while the other Republican candidates continued to report lower contributions. Media stories about Bush’s fundraising discussed his powerful financial networking, while coverage of the other candidates focused on their lack of money. Donald Trump, the eventual Republican nominee and president, showed a comparatively low fundraising amount in the primary phase as he enjoyed much free press coverage because of his notoriety. He also flirted with the idea of being an entirely self-funded candidate.

COMPARING PRIMARY AND GENERAL CAMPAIGNS

Although candidates have the same goal for primary and general elections, which is to win, these elections are very different from each other and require a very different set of strategies. Primary elections are more difficult for the voter. There are more candidates vying to become their party’s nominee, and party identification is not a useful cue because each party has many candidates rather than just one. In the 2016 presidential election, Republican voters in the early primaries were presented with a number of options, including Mike Huckabee, Donald Trump, Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, John Kasich, Chris Christie, Carly Fiorina, Ben Carson, and more. (Huckabee, Christie, and Fiorina dropped out relatively early.) Democrats had to decide between Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Martin O’Malley (who soon dropped out). Voters must find more information about each candidate to decide which is closest to their preferred issue positions. Due to time limitations, voters may not research all the candidates. Nor will all the candidates get enough media or debate time to reach the voters. These issues make campaigning in a primary election difficult, so campaign managers tailor their strategy.

First, name recognition is extremely important. Voters are unlikely to cast a vote for an unknown. Some candidates, like Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush, have held or are related to someone who held national office, but most candidates will be
governors, senators, or local politicians who are less well-known nationally. Barack Obama was a junior senator from Illinois and Bill Clinton was a governor from Arkansas prior to running for president. Voters across the country had little information about them, and both candidates needed media time to become known. While well-known candidates have longer records that can be attacked by the opposition, they also have an easier time raising campaign funds because their odds of winning are better. Newer candidates face the challenge of proving themselves during the short primary season and are more likely to lose. In 2016, both eventual party nominees had massive name recognition. Hillary Clinton enjoyed notoriety from having been First Lady, a U.S. senator from New York, and secretary of state. Donald Trump had name recognition from being an iconic real estate tycoon with Trump buildings all over the world plus a reality TV star via shows like The Apprentice. With Arnold Schwarzenegger having successfully campaigned for California governor, perhaps it should not have surprised the country when Trump was elected president.

Second, visibility is crucial when a candidate is one in a long parade of faces. Given that voters will want to find quick, useful information about each, candidates will try to get the media’s attention and pick up momentum. Media attention is especially important for newer candidates. Most voters assume a candidate’s website and other campaign material will be skewed, showing only the most positive information. The media, on the other hand, are generally considered more reliable and unbiased than a candidate’s campaign materials, so voters turn to news networks and journalists to pick up information about the candidates’ histories and issue positions. Candidates are aware of voters’ preference for quick information and news and try to get interviews or news coverage for themselves. Candidates also benefit from news coverage that is longer and cheaper than campaign ads.

For all these reasons, campaign ads in primary elections rarely mention political parties and instead focus on issue positions or name recognition. Many of the best primary ads help the voters identify issue positions they have in common with the candidate. In 2008, for example, Hillary Clinton ran a holiday ad in which she was seen wrapping presents. Each present had a card with an issue position listed, such as “bring back the troops” or “universal pre-kindergarten.” In a similar, more humorous vein, Mike Huckabee gained name recognition and issue placement with his 2008 primary ad. The “HuckChuck” spot had Chuck Norris repeat Huckabee’s name several times while listing the candidate’s issue positions. Norris’s line, “Mike Huckabee wants to put the IRS out of business,” was one of many statements that repeatedly used Huckabee’s name, increasing voters’ recognition of it (Figure). While neither of these candidates won the nomination, the ads were viewed by millions and were successful as primary ads.
In February 2008, Chuck Norris speaks at a rally for Mike Huckabee in College Station, Texas. (credit: modification of work by "ensign_beedrill"/Flickr)

By the general election, each party has only one candidate, and campaign ads must accomplish a different goal with different voters. Because most party-affiliated voters will cast a ballot for their party’s candidate, the campaigns must try to reach the independent and undecided, as well as try to convince their party members to get out and vote. Some ads will focus on issue and policy positions, comparing the two main party candidates. Other ads will remind party loyalists why it is important to vote. President Lyndon B. Johnson used the infamous “Daisy Girl” ad, which cut from a little girl counting daisy petals to an atomic bomb being dropped, to explain why voters needed to turn out and vote for him. If the voters stayed home, Johnson implied, his opponent, Republican Barry Goldwater, might start an atomic war. The ad aired once as a paid ad on NBC before it was pulled, but the footage appeared on other news stations as newscasters discussed the controversy over it.


More recently, Mitt Romney used the economy to remind moderates and independents in 2012 that household incomes had dropped and the national debt increased. The ad’s goal was to reach voters who had not already decided on a candidate and would use the economy as a primary deciding factor.

Part of the reason Johnson’s campaign ad worked is that more voters turn out for a general election than for other elections. These additional voters are often less ideological and more independent, making them harder to target but possible to win over. They are also less likely to complete a lot of research on the candidates, so campaigns often try to create emotion-based negative ads. While negative ads may decrease voter turnout by making voters more cynical about politics and the election, voters watch and remember them.


Another source of negative ads is from groups outside the campaigns. Sometimes, shadow campaigns, run by political action committees and other organizations without the coordination or guidance of candidates, also use negative ads to reach voters. Even before the Citizens United decision allowed corporations and interest groups to run ads supporting candidates, shadow campaigns existed. In 2004, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth organization ran ads attacking John Kerry’s military service record, and MoveOn attacked George W. Bush’s decision to commit to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2014, super PACs poured more than $300 million into supporting candidates.


Want to know how much money federal candidates and PACs are raising? Visit the Campaign Finance Disclosure Portal at the Federal Election Commission website.

General campaigns also try to get voters to the polls in closely contested states. In 2004, realizing that it would be difficult to convince Ohio Democrats to vote Republican, George W. Bush’s campaign focused on getting the state’s Republican voters to the polls. The volunteers walked through precincts and knocked on Republican doors to raise interest in Bush and the election. Volunteers also called Republican and former Republican households to remind them.
when and where to vote.


The strategy worked, and it reminded future campaigns that an organized effort to get out the vote is still a viable way to win an election.

TECHNOLOGY

Campaigns have always been expensive. Also, they have sometimes been negative and nasty. The 1828 “Coffin Handbill” that John Quincy Adams ran, for instance, listed the names and circumstances of the executions his opponent Andrew Jackson had ordered (Figure). This was in addition to gossip and verbal attacks against Jackson’s wife, who had accidentally committed bigamy when she married him without a proper divorce. Campaigns and candidates have not become more amicable in the years since then.

The infamous “Coffin Handbill” used by John Quincy Adams against Andrew Jackson in the 1828 presidential election.

Once television became a fixture in homes, campaign advertising moved to the airwaves. Television allowed candidates to connect with the voters through video, allowing them to appeal directly to and connect emotionally with voters. While Adlai Stevenson and Dwight D. Eisenhower were the first to use television in their 1952 and 1956 campaigns, the ads
were more like jingles with images. Stevenson’s “Let’s Not Forget the Farmer” ad had a catchy tune, but its animated images were not serious and contributed little to the message. The “Eisenhower Answers America” spots allowed Eisenhower to answer policy questions, but his answers were glib rather than helpful.

John Kennedy’s campaign was the first to use images to show voters that the candidate was the choice for everyone. His ad, “Kennedy,” combined the jingle “Kennedy for me” and photographs of a diverse population dealing with life in the United States.

The Museum of the Moving Image has collected presidential campaign ads from 1952 through today, including the “Kennedy for Me” spot mentioned above. Take a look and see how candidates have created ads to get the voters’ attention and votes over time.

Over time, however, ads became more negative and manipulative. In reaction, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, or McCain–Feingold, included a requirement that candidates stand by their ad and include a recorded statement within the ad stating that they approved the message. Although ads, especially those run by super PACs, continue to be negative, candidates can no longer dodge responsibility for them.

Candidates are also frequently using interviews on late night television to get messages out. Soft news, or infotainment, is a new type of news that combines entertainment and information. Shows like The Daily Show and Last Week Tonight make the news humorous or satirical while helping viewers become more educated about the events around the nation and the world.


In 2008, Huckabee, Obama, and McCain visited popular programs like The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and Late Night with Conan O’Brien to target informed voters in the under-45 age bracket. The candidates were able to show their funny sides and appear like average Americans, while talking a bit about their policy preferences. By fall of 2015, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert had already interviewed most of the potential presidential candidates, including Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump.

The Internet has given candidates a new platform and a new way to target voters. In the 2000 election, campaigns moved online and created websites to distribute information. They also began using search engine results to target voters with ads. In 2004, Democratic candidate Howard Dean used the Internet to reach out to potential donors. Rather than host expensive dinners to raise funds, his campaign posted footage on his website of the candidate eating a turkey sandwich. The gimmick brought over $200,000 in campaign donations and reiterated Dean’s commitment to be a down-to-earth candidate. Candidates also use social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to interact with supporters and get the attention of younger voters.

VOTER DECISION MAKING

When citizens do vote, how do they make their decisions? The election environment is complex and most voters don’t have time to research everything about the candidates and issues. Yet they will need to make a fully rational assessment of the choices for an elected office. To meet this goal, they tend to take shortcuts.
One popular shortcut is simply to vote using party affiliation. Many political scientists consider party-line voting to be rational behavior because citizens register for parties based upon either position preference or socialization. Similarly, candidates align with parties based upon their issue positions. A Democrat who votes for a Democrat is very likely selecting the candidate closest to his or her personal ideology. While party identification is a voting cue, it also makes for a logical decision.

Citizens also use party identification to make decisions via straight-ticket voting—choosing every Republican or Democratic Party member on the ballot. In some states, such as Texas or Michigan, selecting one box at the top of the ballot gives a single party all the votes on the ballot (Figure). Straight-ticket voting does cause problems in states that include non-partisan positions on the ballot. In Michigan, for example, the top of the ballot (presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial and representative seats) will be partisan, and a straight-ticket vote will give a vote to all the candidates in the selected party. But the middle or bottom of the ballot includes seats for local offices or judicial seats, which are non-partisan. These offices would receive no vote, because the straight-ticket votes go only to partisan seats. In 2010, actors from the former political drama *The West Wing* came together to create an advertisement for Mary McCormack’s sister Bridget, who was running for a non-partisan seat on the Michigan Supreme Court. The ad reminded straight-ticket voters to cast a ballot for the court seats as well; otherwise, they would miss an important election. McCormack won the seat.

Voters in Michigan can use straight-ticket voting. To fill out their ballot, they select one box at the top to give a single party all the votes on the ballot.

Straight-ticket voting does have the advantage of reducing ballot fatigue. Ballot fatigue occurs when someone votes only for the top or important ballot positions, such as president or governor, and stops voting rather than continue to the bottom of a long ballot. In 2012, for example, 70 percent of registered voters in Colorado cast a ballot for the presidential seat, yet only 54 percent voted yes or no on retaining Nathan B. Coats for the state supreme court.

“Presidential Electors,” [http://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elec…president.html](http://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elec…president.html) (July 15, 2015); “Judicial Retention—Supreme Court,” [http://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elec…remeCourt.html](http://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elec…remeCourt.html) (July 15, 2015).

Voters make decisions based upon candidates’ physical characteristics, such as attractiveness or facial features.


They may also vote based on gender or race, because they assume the elected official will make policy decisions based on a demographic shared with the voters. Candidates are very aware of voters’ focus on these non-political traits. In
2008, a sizable portion of the electorate wanted to vote for either Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama because they offered new demographics—either the first woman or the first black president. Demographics hurt John McCain that year, because many people believed that at 71 he was too old to be president.


Hillary Clinton faced this situation again in 2016 as she became the first female nominee from a major party. In essence, attractiveness can make a candidate appear more competent, which in turn can help him or her ultimately win.


Aside from party identification and demographics, voters will also look at issues or the economy when making a decision. For some single-issue voters, a candidate’s stance on abortion rights will be a major factor, while other voters may look at the candidates’ beliefs on the Second Amendment and gun control. Single-issue voting may not require much more effort by the voter than simply using party identification; however, many voters are likely to seek out a candidate’s position on a multitude of issues before making a decision. They will use the information they find in several ways.

Retrospective voting occurs when the voter looks at the candidate’s past actions and the past economic climate and makes a decision only using these factors. This behavior may occur during economic downturns or after political scandals, when voters hold politicians accountable and do not wish to give the representative a second chance. Pocketbook voting occurs when the voter looks at his or her personal finances and circumstances to decide how to vote. Someone having a harder time finding employment or seeing investments suffer during a particular candidate or party’s control of government will vote for a different candidate or party than the incumbent. Prospective voting occurs when the voter applies information about a candidate’s past behavior to decide how the candidate will act in the future. For example, will the candidate’s voting record or actions help the economy and better prepare him or her to be president during an economic downturn? The challenge of this voting method is that the voters must use a lot of information, which might be conflicting or unrelated, to make an educated guess about how the candidate will perform in the future. Voters do appear to rely on prospective and retrospective voting more often than on pocketbook voting.

In some cases, a voter may cast a ballot strategically. In these cases, a person may vote for a second- or third-choice candidate, either because his or her preferred candidate cannot win or in the hope of preventing another candidate from winning. This type of voting is likely to happen when there are multiple candidates for one position or multiple parties running for one seat.


In Florida and Oregon, for example, Green Party voters (who tend to be liberal) may choose to vote for a Democrat if the Democrat might otherwise lose to a Republican. Similarly, in Georgia, while a Libertarian may be the preferred candidate, the voter would rather have the Republican candidate win over the Democrat and will vote accordingly.

One other way voters make decisions is through incumbency. In essence, this is retrospective voting, but it requires little of the voter. In congressional and local elections, incumbents win reelection up to 90 percent of the time, a result called the incumbency advantage. What contributes to this advantage and often persuades competent challengers not to run? First, incumbents have name recognition and voting records. The media is more likely to interview them because they have advertised their name over several elections and have voted on legislation affecting the state or district. Incumbents also have won election before, which increases the odds that political action committees and interest groups will give them money; most interest groups will not give money to a candidate destined to lose.

Incumbents also have franking privileges, which allows them a limited amount of free mail to communicate with the voters in their district. While these mailings may not be sent in the days leading up to an election—sixty days for a senator and ninety days for a House member—congressional representatives are able to build a free relationship with voters through them.


Moreover, incumbents have exiting campaign organizations, while challengers must build new organizations from the ground up. Lastly, incumbents have more money in their war chests than most challengers.

Another incumbent advantage is gerrymandering, the drawing of district lines to guarantee a desired electoral outcome. Every ten years, following the U.S. Census, the number of House of Representatives members allotted to each state is determined based on a state’s population. If a state gains or loses seats in the House, the state must redraw districts to ensure each district has an equal number of citizens. States may also choose to redraw these districts at other times and for other reasons.


If the district is drawn to ensure that it includes a majority of Democratic or Republican Party members within its boundaries, for instance, then candidates from those parties will have an advantage.

Gerrymandering helps local legislative candidates and members of the House of Representatives, who win reelection over 90 percent of the time. Senators and presidents do not benefit from gerrymandering because they are not running in a district. Presidents and senators win states, so they benefit only from war chests and name recognition. This is one reason why senators running in 2014, for example, won reelection only 82 percent of the time.


Since 1960, the American National Election Studies has been asking a random sample of voters a battery of questions about how they voted. The data are available at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan.

Summary

Campaigns must try to convince undecided voters to vote for a candidate and get the party voters to the polls. Early money allows candidates to start a strong campaign and attract other donations. The election year starts with primary...
campaigns, in which multiple candidates compete for each party’s nomination, and the focus is on name recognition and issue positions. General election campaigns focus on getting party members to the polls. Shadow campaigns and super PACs may run negative ads to influence voters. Modern campaigns use television to create emotions and the Internet to interact with supporters and fundraise.

Most voters will cast a ballot for the candidate from their party. Others will consider the issues a candidate supports. Some voters care about what candidates have done in the past, or what they may do in the future, while others are concerned only about their personal finances. Lastly, some citizens will be concerned with the candidate’s physical characteristics. Incumbents have many advantages, including war chests, franking privileges, and gerrymandering.

Susan is currently working two part-time jobs and is frustrated about the poor economy. On Election Day, she votes for every challenger on the ballot, because she feels the president and Congress are not doing enough to help her. What type of vote did she cast?

1. retrospective
2. prospective
3. pocketbook
4. straight ticket

Which factor is most likely to lead to the incumbency advantage for a candidate?

1. candidate’s socioeconomic status
2. gerrymandering of the candidate’s district
3. media’s support of the candidate
4. candidate’s political party

In what ways is voting your party identification an informed choice? In what ways is it lazy?

Do physical characteristics matter when voters assess candidates? If so, how?

Glossary

**ballot fatigue**
the result when a voter stops voting for offices and initiatives at the bottom of a long ballot

**incumbency advantage**
the advantage held by officeholders that allows them to often win reelection

**shadow campaign**
a campaign run by political action committees and other organizations without the coordination of the candidate

**straight-ticket voting**
the practice of voting only for candidates from the same party