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Lynn Vavreck: The Message Matters

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Chapter One

PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

IN 1976 JIMMY CARTER ran for president of the United States as a trustworthy Washington outsider. He was elected by defeating an opponent who was the consummate Washington insider—a man who pardoned Richard Nixon and who was appointed to the vice presidency and the presidency. Gerald Ford was as inside the Washington Beltway as one could get—and he could not get out. Similarly, John F. Kennedy in 1960 recognized his opponent’s culpability in what was called “The Missile Gap”—the alleged fact that America had fallen behind Russia in weapons development. Richard Nixon, whose administration had presided over this “slump” in American productivity, had no evidence it did not exist and could not counter Kennedy’s claim. Thus, he too, was stuck—although the economy was doing well and the War in Vietnam had not yet escalated.

What Carter and Kennedy both recognized and exploited was a dimension of electoral politics on which their opponents faced constraints. Although Ford and Nixon were members of incumbent administrations and the nation’s economy was growing over the course of their stewardships, their challengers defeated them. This book is about how candidates campaign, what effects these campaigns have on voters, and how the context of elections conditions all of these things in important ways.

What we know about why presidential candidates lose elections mostly centers around campaign strategies or candidate style. Pundits are quick to blame electoral losses on a poor campaign strategy or a candidate’s inability to connect with voters on the stump. Journalists, however, are rarely heard suggesting that a candidate lost because his or her policies were unpopular. Why did Michael Dukakis lose the 1988 presidential election after a seventeen-point lead coming out of his convention? It must be because George Bush out campaigned him, say the experts. The *New York Times* Editorial Board wrote:

He [Dukakis] was not destined to lose at all, and did so only because he ran a dismal campaign. . . . “Why didn’t he say . . .” became a virtual motto of endless exasperation—when the Dukakis campaign gave leaden answers or no answers at all to accusations about the Pledge of Allegiance or prison furloughs or to questions like, “How would Governor Dukakis feel if his wife were raped and murdered?” (November 9, 1988, p. A34)

Similarly, why did Bill Clinton win the 1992 election at a time when the incumbent Bush was popular and the economy was recovering from a recession?

Many pundits answered that it was Clinton's "War Room" campaign strategists who outmaneuvered the Bush campaign on a daily basis, or that Bush himself was somehow a "bad" campaigner:

Something odd happens to Mr. Bush when he vaults into "campaign mode." His good manners fall away and he stands revealed as Nasty-man. . . . this time it went from Red-baiting to juvenile expostulations like, "My dog Millie knows more about foreign affairs than these two bozos." (November 5, 1992, p. A34).

What exactly is a good campaign or a good campaigner? These concepts have certain ephemeral qualities about them. Experts cannot precisely detail what makes a campaign "good," except maybe that it produced a winner; and, they know a good campaigner when they see one. Such explication is not helpful. Most notably it ignores the fact that one candidate can be a good campaigner in one year (Bush in 1988) and a lousy one in a later year (Bush in 1992). If campaign success were merely a function of the candidate's ability to strategize about how to beat the opponent and then execute that strategy effectively, we would not expect to see such differences in the successes of candidates like Bush (1988, 1992), Carter (1976, 1980), and Nixon (1960, 1968, 1972).

There must be more to the story about why campaigns are successful than strategy and execution. My aim in this book is to explore more systematically the types of campaigns run by candidates for president of the United States by paying special attention to the messages they send and the constraints candidates face when running their campaigns.

The most important constraint for all candidates is the condition of the nation's economy. Others include previously taken issue positions or personal characteristics. I focus on illustrating why candidates like Carter and Kennedy exploit their opponents' weaknesses, while Reagan and Eisenhower talk mainly about a booming economy, largely ignoring their opponent's presence in the race—and why these campaign strategies are predictable well in advance of the election, and ultimately successful. My hope is that presidential campaigns may come to be viewed not as exercises in strategy executed by idiosyncratic candidates whose personal capabilities and whims influence success, but as logical, rational and often predetermined means toward an end.

BASIC QUESTIONS

Much attention has been given recently to presidential campaigns because they are "too negative" or "too long" or cost "too much" money. Proposed reforms include removing or lessening the role of money, giving candidates free television advertising time, urging newspapers to report when candidates are lying or misleading voters in their advertisements, and asking candidates to sign "codes of conduct" or compacts to promise "good behavior." These complaints and reforms presuppose that money, ads, newspaper coverage, and campaign tone all

matter to voters on Election Day. Or more generally, that what goes on during campaigns for the presidency matters to voters at all. The extent to which discussion about these reforms increases in the absence of scholarly understanding about whether and how campaigns “matter” to voters is striking. While journalists, pundits, and voters may be confident that presidential campaigns influence election outcomes, political scientists have not always been so sure.

Party identification is still the greatest and most powerful predictor of vote choice across any demographic group (Miller 1994; Bartels 2000b). Most people do not pay much attention to politics or campaigns, even when faced with making a decision about their president. And, worse yet, perhaps because of their lack of attention, it seems that many voters are uninformed about where the candidates for president stand on various and important issues. Some argue that since party identification is known, presumably, before the campaign starts, and voters do not attend to campaigns when they are happening, campaigns must not matter to voting outcomes.

The study of campaigns, however, is not that simple. What does it mean, for example, to say that a campaign “matters”? Does a campaign matter if it changes someone’s choices or vote decision? This is simple—probably so. However, does the campaign matter if it reinforces a voter’s decision—if it makes the voter more confident of his or her choice? What if campaigns change the focus of national discussion; do they matter then—even if a campaign does not produce a winning candidate or change people’s minds? If campaigns teach voters about the current state of the economy or of education policy or of trade policy in America, does it matter that voters have learned during the campaign even if their voting decisions were left unaffected? Any sophisticated and systematic analysis of campaigns and their effects must deal with these questions before moving on to assess whether the process is in need of change.

Many have argued that investigating the effects of campaigns is so complex as to be nearly impossible. Campaigns, because of their dynamic, contemporaneous, competitive, and cumulative nature take place in a research environment that is difficult to control. My own view is slightly more optimistic. If political scientists can theorize about voting behavior then we can theorize about campaign behavior and effects. Moreover, starting from a theory about how and why campaigns can matter, we can observe patterns of behavior among candidates that add to our understanding of the dynamic, contemporaneous, competitive, and cumulative nature of the campaign environment. That is what I attempt to do in the pages that follow.

WHAT’S COMING

This book is divided into three parts. Part I sets the stage for the other two by introducing theories of voting behavior and extrapolating them into a theory of how and why campaigns can matter (chapter 2). From this theory, a cam-

campaign typology is developed that introduces two types of campaigns, distinguished by their messages: the clarifying campaign (in which candidates clarify their position on an already important issue—the economy) and the insurgent campaign (in which candidates attempt to reset the agenda from the economy and onto an issue about which their opponent has previously committed to a position less popular than their own). Each campaign type consists of unique messaging by candidates and unique effects on voters (chapter 3). For example, in the clarifying campaign I expect candidates to talk mainly about the economy—simply taking credit for the good economic times or laying blame for the bad. Voters, then, should be very certain of the candidate's positions on economic issues by the end of the campaign as they learn about them throughout the process. In the insurgent campaign the candidate is expected to talk mainly about an insurgent issue (one on which his opponent is less popular than him). If the insurgent candidate is successful, voters, over time, should begin to believe that this issue is more important to their voting decision.

In chapter 3 I also explain how the theory suggests candidates sort themselves into these two categories. Of critical importance here is the state of the nation's economy. The candidate who is predicted to win the election based on a simple economic forecast runs the clarifying campaign. This could be the incumbent in a good economy or the challenger in a bad economy. The predicted economic loser runs the insurgent campaign. I use a simple economic forecast to predict what types of campaigns the theory suggests candidates will run over the period 1952–2000.

Part II begins in chapter 4 in which I detail the content of modern presidential campaigns by conducting an analysis of campaign advertisements, stump speeches, and campaign news coverage for every presidential election between 1952 and 2000. The data reveal a great divide between what candidates say and do and what the media report about them. In chapter 5 I explain candidate behavior in campaigns using the theory and typology as foundations. Using content analyses from the *New York Times*, candidate advertisements, and candidate stump speeches, I am able to compare what candidates actually talk about during their campaigns with what the theory predicts they should have talked about. The analytic power of the theory is tested as I discover that eventual winners are most often those candidates who behave as the theory and typology predict they should. Candidates who violate the typology's prescriptions lose elections.

In chapter 6, Part III, I turn the investigative light onto the behavior of voters in elections, searching for the unique effects associated with the clarifying and insurgent campaigns. Using public opinion data from 1952 to 2000 provided by the National Election Study, I assess whether candidates who conform to the typology's prescriptions are able to influence voters in specific and meaningful ways. Finally, in chapter 7 I engage larger theoretical questions about context and constraints. Can incumbent presidents manipulate national con-

text? Is there an insurgent issue for every insurgent candidate or are some candidates just lucky? And, finally, how do these findings fit with common notions about elections?

Much of the theorizing and analyses in the beginning and latter parts of the book are based upon the use of statistical and mathematical models. As much as possible I have tried to present material in the main sections of the book in terms that citizens interested in politics can understand. The nuances of mathematics and modeling, along with detailed information on the data, models, and estimates from which my conclusions are drawn can be found in the book's Appendix.