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Dennis W. Johnson

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Paul S. Herrnson, Colton C. Campbell

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Modern Political Campaigns in the United States

Paul S. Herrnson and Colton C. Campbell

Elections are central to the struggle for power in democracies, and political campaigns bring meaning to those struggles. Like much of our political landscape, the participants, strategies, and campaign tactics involved in elections have shifted over time. Early campaigns were inexpensive, nonpartisan, and highly personalized events geared toward persuading a small percentage of the population. By contrast, many contemporary campaigns are orchestrated events that entail large sums of money, professional campaign organizations, political parties, interest groups, volunteers, and complicated targeting and marketing strategies involving millions of voters. The one principle that has remained relatively constant is that the candidate who garners the most votes wins. This winner-takes-all principle applied to the campaigns for colonial legislatures held prior to the United States' founding, and it continues to hold true for most contemporary elections. With some exceptions, most notably the requirement that presidential candidates win a majority of the Electoral College vote, it applies to nomination contests, general elections, and run-off elections.

The Strategic Environment and Electioneering

The types of campaigns that characterize a democracy are shaped by the strategic environment in which they take place.¹ This typically includes the constitutional design of the political system, the nature of the offices candidates seek, the laws and rules governing party nominations or general elections, and the relatively enduring aspects of a nation's political culture involving citizens' attitudes toward politics, politicians, political parties, and interest groups. The strategic environment also encompasses the methods available for candidates, parties, advocacy groups, and others participants in elections used to communicate with voters. These methods have evolved over time from word of mouth and pamphlets to television advertising to Internet web sites. A final element of the strategic environment is the immediate—and very fluid—political setting. This may involve national factors such as the state of the economy, presidential popularity, and the mood of the public, as well as local factors involving the partisanship and competitiveness of the district where an election is being held, whether an incumbent is seeking reelection, and local conditions and events.

The strategic environment influences the roles of candidates, political parties, and interest groups in the campaign process.² The institutional design of the American political system, including the separation of powers, federalism, bicameral legislatures, and the further decentralization of

state and local offices, which formally separates elections for political offices from one another, allows for wide latitude in tailoring campaigns to fit state and local traditions, political conditions, and the preference of voters. It also tends to grant those who hold elected offices independent claims to exercise political power. These institutional features enable voters to hold individual officeholders accountable for their performance in office.

The US system contrasts sharply with the party-focused campaigns that are common in parliamentary democracies, such as Great Britain, which do not spread power to as many separate different political institutions or encourage voters to hold individual candidates responsible for their entire party's performance in office. (See Chapter 21, by Dominic Wring on British campaigns.) Moreover, the United States' single-member simple-plurality elections, in which the voters in a given district cast one vote and the candidate receiving the most votes wins, also encourage independence among candidates and officeholders and give voters the motivation to make discrete assessments of individual candidates for office.

The widespread use of these single-member simple-plurality elections also discourages the formation of third parties and minimizes their prospects for success, helping to reinforce the United States' two-party system. This system differs substantially from democracies such as Italy and Germany that use proportional representation, in which parties and political groups are allocated seats in legislative bodies in proportion to their share of the vote. (See, for example, Chapter 22, by Marco Althaus on German elections.) Proportional representation lends itself to the formation of many political parties, and by tying the electoral fortunes of candidates of the same party together it encourages those candidates to practice greater teamwork in elections than do US candidates.

Of course, the nature of election constituencies also influences the conduct of campaigns. Candidates running for offices that have small districts comprising few voters, such as a city council, can run campaigns consisting primarily of grassroots activities. Door-to-door canvassing, newsletter drops, house parties (also called "meet and greets"), and yard signs typically form the core of these campaigns. Meeting with local newspaper editorial boards can also be important. Candidates for offices that have geographically large districts, such as the presidency or statewide office, must run much more complex campaigns. The same is true of House members and candidates from large cities. These campaigns require considerably more planning, money, and professional expertise. Most rely on television, radio, direct mail, and mass telephone calls for communication. Even their grassroots efforts are influenced by complex voter targeting analyses.

The rules governing the nomination process strongly influence the types of campaigns that candidates wage.³ Candidates who must win a party nomination through a primary election, as is used to select general election candidates in most states, or a caucus, like that used in Iowa, create campaign organizations to wage their nomination campaigns. Candidates who are selected in private meetings where dues-paying party members decide among themselves who should win the party nomination do not need to assemble an organization to mount a nomination campaign. The first approach, used in the contemporary United States, results in candidates possessing general election campaign organizations that are more or less independent of party committees. The second approach, which was used in the party-centered era in the US, and remains in use in most modern industrialized democracies, produces election campaigns that are primarily conducted by party committees rather than candidates.

Campaign finance especially shapes political campaigns. Whether campaigns rely on public funds furnished by the government, funds raised by political parties, or funds that candidates must raise from individuals, interest groups, party committees, or their own resources has a tremendous impact on campaign independence from other organizations and campaign conduct. Of course, campaign finance laws can have a significant impact on whom candidates turn to for money. The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 and its predecessors, including the Federal Election

Campaign Act of 1971 and its amendments, regulate the flow of money in presidential and congressional elections. (See Chapter 12, by Anthony Gierzynski on financing American elections.) Among other things, they determine which individuals and organizations can legally make contributions and expenditures in federal elections and, in some cases, establish limits for these transactions. Similar effects are due to the myriad of state and local laws that govern the financing of state and local campaigns. These laws are important. Not surprisingly, candidates who rely on public funds, including some presidential candidates, invest less time and energy in raising money than those who finance their campaigns with funds raised from private sources. Indeed, the money chase in most US elections is a campaign in and of itself. This sets the United States apart from most Western democracies, where parties raise most of the campaign money or receive the lion's share of the public campaign subsidies from the government. Campaigns in those nations are generally dominated by party committees; candidates are much less in the front and center in these party-focused campaigns.

Broader societal conditions also affect the nature of political campaigns. Public attitudes toward parties, candidates, and politics more generally influence the style and tenor of campaigns. Candidate-centered campaigns typically occur in locations and eras where the citizenry are ambivalent about parties and politics. Such campaigns are often characterized by populist themes or anti-government or anti-politician rhetoric. Party-focused elections are more prevalent in places and times where voters consider political parties part of the natural order of government and society, such as the nineteenth-century United States and contemporary Europe.

Finally, technology plays a very important role in the conduct of campaigns. Campaigns are first and foremost about communicating to and mobilizing voters to show up at the polls. As technology advances the methods available for voter outreach also improve. This has several other implications for campaigning. First, those with the most ready access to the means for reaching out to voters are among the most influential in elections. Thus, wealthy candidates, political parties, and interest groups are the most likely to benefit from technological innovation. Second, innovations can alter the balance of power between different participants in the election process. For example, television, with its potential for unmediated candidate-to-voter contact, increased the degree to which campaigns focus on candidates, as opposed to parties.⁴ Third, technological improvements can lead to refinements in the planning and execution of campaign strategies. The advent of direct mail, e-mail, and computerized databases, for instance, provided candidates, parties, and interest groups with opportunities to tailor their appeals to specific groups of voters. (See Chapter 8, by Stephen K. Medvic on technology and campaigning.)

Political Campaigns in Early America

The first campaigns for public office in America were markedly different from those waged in the twenty-first century, in large part because the voting population was so different. Roughly 5% of the overall population was eligible to vote in colonial times, as voting was restricted primarily to white, male, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, landowners. Additionally, politics was a part-time enterprise: colonial and later state legislatures conducted legislative business for just a few months each year and the compensation received by most elected officials was minimal to nonexistent, barely making up the time lost at their actual professions. Given this narrow electorate and the limited direct financial pay-off for elected officials and their followers, political campaigns were highly elitist, personal, and fairly inexpensive. They more closely resembled extended semi-private conversations among society's elite than the very public communications of contemporary campaigns that intrude on the lives of virtually everyone who owns a television. Political discussions took place without the benefit of political parties, campaign commercials, rallies, or large fundraising events.

Political campaigning in the new American states was not too dissimilar. Aspirants for public office held quiet meetings and corresponded with those few individuals who were eligible to vote. Campaign conversations generally were well-reasoned discussions of the great issues of the day between candidates and voters. In short, candidates did not take to the stump, there were no organized rallies, nor did candidates or parties launch full-blown public relations campaigns. Even the presidential elections of this period did not have the massive communications, voter registration, and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) drives that typify modern elections. Electioneering entailed a small number of gentleman candidates requesting the votes and political support of others similarly situated in society.

By the early 1820s through the early 1900s, however, the elite-level principled discussions of colonial days gave way to organized rallies, speeches, parades, and other popular events designed to convey a message and mobilize the masses. Party machines fostered bonds between themselves and voters both during and between campaign seasons, with the goal of building a loyal voter base.⁵ The result was the emergence of strong identification and partisan loyalties among most voters to a particular party. As such, parties became the major vehicles for virtually every facet of the campaign process: from candidate recruitment, to the nomination process, to the resources needed to communicate with the electorate, and to the party symbols and labels that gave meaning to voters and helped them choose candidates.⁶

Party-dominated campaigns eventually lost ground to candidate-focused campaigns due to one set of progressive reforms passed in the early 1900s and a later set passed in the 1960s and 1970s. Both sets of reforms sought to limit the role of the party organizations in the nomination process and general election. The people planning and conducting campaigns were no longer reliant on party loyalists, but instead on a personal team assembled by—and beholden to—the candidate, such as professional political consultants. Consequently, candidates were “marketed” not as party members, but as individuals. Candidates and their campaign managers made the strategic and tactical decisions as well as supervised the day-to-day activities of the campaign.⁷ They were responsible for hiring the staff and the political consultants to carry out fundraising, research, communications, and most other campaign activities. And they used new-found survey research techniques to develop their own public images and to select the issues and themes that formed their message, as well as choose the specific forms of media—such as radio, television and direct mail—to convey that message directly into voters’ living rooms. Perhaps most important, candidates, not political parties, became the central focus of fundraising appeals. Almost every candidate organization hired individuals to raise funds using appeals based on the candidate’s background, experience, and stance on issues, and who had expertise in more modern techniques, such as direct mail solicitations and bundling.⁸

Political Campaigns in the Modern Era

Political campaigns in the modern era continue to revolve primarily around candidates and the staff hired to mount their campaigns.⁹ Candidates are responsible for assembling their own campaign team. They and those individuals with whom they surround themselves are responsible for the conduct of their own election campaigns. According to at least one study, in the 2004 federal election cycle, presidential candidates, national party committees, general election candidates for Congress, and various interest groups spent nearly \$2 billion on such professional consultant services.¹⁰ Party organizations and some interest groups, however, have become increasingly involved in closely contested elections to assume a greater role in the candidate-centered system. While less visibly involved in localities where these contests are officially non-partisan and party labels do not appear with the candidates’ names, parties and outside groups help recruit candidates and provide many, especially those running for Congress, with traditional

grassroots support, such as fundraising and campaign organization, as well as communicating with and mobilizing voters. Additionally, parties and interest groups participate through independent, parallel, and coordinated campaigns designed to influence both the political agenda and the voters' behavior.¹¹

Candidates and Campaign Management

Campaign management in most elections for Congress, state legislatures, local and municipal offices—or down-ballot races—is now dominated by candidate campaign organizations. Figure 2.1 depicts the level of professionalism of different campaigns, where campaign professionalism is measured by the number of major campaign activities performed by a paid campaign aide or political consultant. Ranging from 0–12, the measure includes campaign management, press relations, issue or opposition research, fundraising, polling, mass media advertising, direct mail, web site construction and maintenance, mass telephone calls, GOTV activities, legal advice, and accounting. It shows that the typical House campaign employs roughly six professionals. The number is larger for Senate campaigns, which average between eight and nine campaign professionals per candidate organization. Most of these campaigns hire such experts to manage activities that require technical expertise, such as polling and media advertising, in-depth research, or connections with sources of funds, which as the figure demonstrates, has a significant impact on the number of votes candidates receive. Presidential campaigns, not surprisingly, are off the chart in terms of campaign professionalism. In campaign activities where a typical House candidate would hire consultant or campaign aide and a Senate candidate might hire a team of consultants,

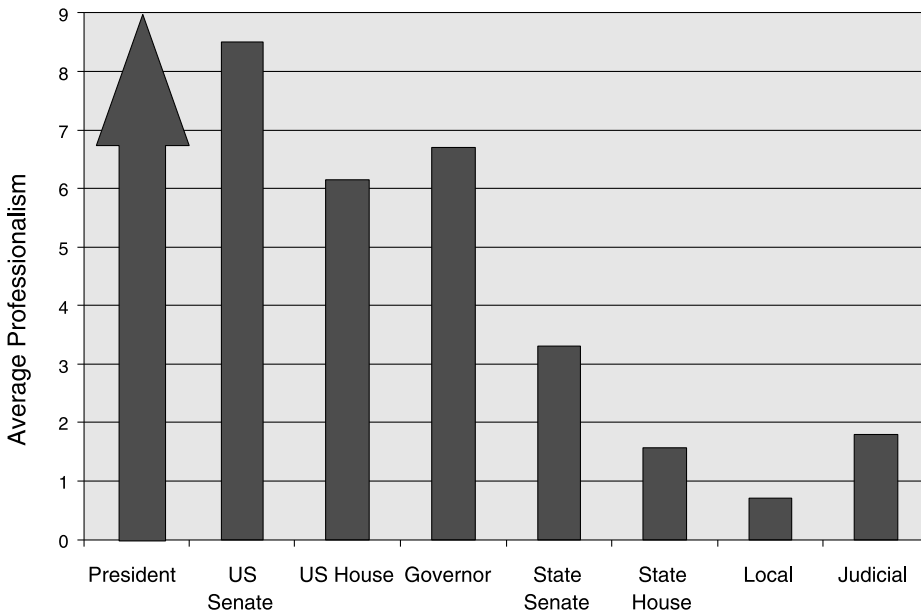


Figure 2.1. The Professionalism of Different Campaigns

Source: Paul S. Herrnson, *The 2002 Congressional Campaign Study* (College Park, Md.: University of Maryland, 2002); and Paul S. Herrnson, *The Campaign Assessment and Candidate Outreach Project* (College Park, Md.: University of Maryland, 2001).

Notes: The figures represent the number of major campaign activities performed by a paid campaign aide or political consultant. The activities are: management, press relations, issue or opposition research, fundraising, polling, mass media advertising, direct mail, web site construction and maintenance, mass telephone calls, GOTV activities, legal advice, and accounting. The data for federal offices are from 2002; data for state and local offices are from 1997–1998.

presidential campaigns often hire a team of consultants for each state or region. Campaigns for the state legislature and for judgeships tend to hire fewer campaign professionals. However, the trend toward more sophisticated and expensive campaigns has led to more professionalized campaign organizations for elections further down the ballot.

Do such campaign organizations have a significant impact on election outcomes? If House campaigns are typical, then the answer is a resounding yes. Congressional challengers and open-seat contestants are typically helped the most by fielding a professional campaigning organization, sometimes increasing their vote share by as much as five percentage points.¹² While this may not be enough to defeat an entrenched incumbent, hiring a team of skilled campaign aides and political consultants can help a candidate raise more money, attract more media attention, and wage a more competitive campaign. In some cases, it may be critical in bringing about victory.¹³

The Role of Party and Group Efforts in Contemporary Campaign Politics

At the national level party organizations in Washington, D.C., have assumed an important role in the recruitment of congressional candidates. National party organizations, particularly the Democratic and Republican congressional and senatorial campaign committees, actively identify and encourage some candidates to run for Congress and discourage others.¹⁴ The same is true of legislative campaign committees in many states. These party committees provide modest encouragement and advice for large numbers of politicians who wish to run for Congress, or a state legislature. They instead commit a significant amount of time courting certain candidates to run for the few seats they anticipate will be competitive. This is done through a variety of methods, including providing poll results demonstrating the person's popularity with voters or potential for winning, and promising to provide campaign contributions and assistance with fundraising, communications, and other campaign activities should the candidate win the nomination.

In primary contests where the party leaders who direct these committees believe that one candidate will be more viable in the general election than the others, these leaders and committee staff may actively discourage the others from running. Usually candidates who are ideological extremists are discouraged from running in favor of moderates. The 2006 mid-term elections provide a noteworthy example. In its successful effort to retake the House of Representatives, rather than rallying its liberal base, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) sought moderate-to-conservative candidates who could attract more traditional voters. Such de-recruitment strategies can be very effective at winnowing the field of potential candidates. However, in a few cases where they fail, and where party leaders believe one potential contender would be much stronger in the general election than another, the congressional campaign committees actively back one primary candidate.

Like political parties, many interest groups recruit candidates for public office. These include various labor unions; the Club for Growth, an anti-tax group that supports Republican candidates who favor free-market economics; the League of Conservation Voters, an environmental group that supports mainly Democrats; and EMILY'S List (whose motto is "Early Money is Like Yeast. . . . It makes the dough [i.e. money] rise"), which seeks to elect pro-choice Democratic women. Unlike political parties, however, these organizations become extremely involved in contested nomination contests, with some providing candidates with endorsements, monetary contributions, and campaign assistance during the primary season. They also supply campaigns with volunteers; air campaign advertisements on radio and television supporting one candidate (or opposing others); make similar appeals via mail, e-mail, or telephone; and mobilize their members on primary day.

Political parties and interest groups are much bolder about participating in the opposing party's nomination contests. The 2002 California gubernatorial contest provides a particularly

noteworthy example. Incumbent governor Gray Davis, who faced only token opposition in his race for the Democratic nomination, spent an estimated \$10 million attacking former Los Angeles mayor and moderate Richard Riordan in the Republican primary. His goal was to boost the prospects of conservative businessman Bill Simon, who Davis and most Democrats considered the less viable of the two opponents. The plan ultimately succeeded as Simon defeated Riordan by roughly 49% of the vote to 31% in the Republican primary, and Davis went on to defeat Simon by 47% to 42% in the general election. Ironically, Davis was recalled in late 2003, less than a year after being reelected.

The influence of political parties and interest groups in the conduct and management of campaigns depends primarily on the resources those organizations can bring to bear on the campaign. In the case of presidential elections, the two major-party candidates, and some minor-party contestants, have sufficient financial and personnel resources to wage substantial campaigns. Party committees and allied interest groups typically assist presidential campaigns by providing financial and organizational support, communications, and voter mobilization assistance. In return, they may ask a candidate to visit a particular locality, make an effort to boost the prospects of a candidate for lower office, or draw attention to one or more issues when making a speech. The same type of cooperation exists in most gubernatorial campaigns.

Political parties, particularly congressional, senatorial, and state legislative campaign committees in many states, assist legislative candidates with hiring campaign aides and political consultants and with management, fundraising, communications, and other aspects of campaigning requiring specialized expertise.¹⁵ These party committees maintain lists of qualified consultants, facilitate matchmaking between consultants and candidates, and provide some campaigns with general strategic and organizational advice. They also hold training seminars for candidates, campaign aides, and political activists.

However, in a small number of elections featuring candidates in very close contests, political parties and other groups often play larger roles.¹⁶ Party operatives take a vigorous interest in ensuring these campaigns hire staff and consultants that have the ability to wage a strong campaign. They help the campaign write a sound campaign plan, and party field-staff routinely visit campaign headquarters to provide strategic advice and to report to their party committees about the campaign's progress. In a few cases, party committees, and some interest groups, dispatch some of their personnel to work full time on a campaign as well as state legislative or congressional staff to work in the final weeks. While most candidates appreciate the support they receive from these organizations, it can stir tensions because the campaign's own aides consider themselves experts on their candidate or the local strategic environment and the party and interest group aides consider themselves as experts on campaign politics. Some candidates and campaign aides view party and interest group personnel to be outsiders and are resentful of the roles they seek to assume in the campaign. Nevertheless, even these candidates and their aides usually accept advice from these individuals because to do otherwise could result in their campaigns being cut off from large contributions and other forms of campaign assistance.

Fundraising

The roles of party committees and interest groups in fundraising have increased considerably. The parties' congressional, senatorial, and state legislative campaign committees have become especially aggressive and adept at raising and channeling campaign money to specific candidates, namely those in competitive elections. In the first quarter of 2007, for instance, the DCCC raised \$19 million while the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) raised \$15.8 million.¹⁷ Additionally, to boost its campaign coffers in order to protect its new majority the DCCC has implemented a new biannual dues structure that requires members to raise money specifically for the DCCC. Besides their regular party dues, House Democrats are now

required to pay the DCCC either \$75,000 or \$100,000—depending on different factors such as committee assignments—over the course of the two-year election cycle.¹⁸ Members can meet their individual goals any number of ways: by hosting events specifically for the DCCC, making telephone calls, e-mailing or mailing solicitations, and by meeting with certain donors.

Some party committees and interest groups assist candidates with fundraising, provide candidates with lists of potential donors and give them advice on how to solicit contributions from them. They use letters, newsletters, e-mail, briefings, and other methods to circulate favorable information about the candidates they support to other donors that fall within their sphere of influence. And some organizations, mainly party committees, ask powerful officeholders to use their political muscle to encourage donors to contribute to other candidates who are in need of funds. This so-called “buddy system” works particularly well when legislative incumbents are paired with non-incumbents who share their political views.

The new roles of party committees and interest groups in fundraising have had a number of important consequences. They have contributed to the development of a more nationalized system of campaign finance and enhanced the parties’ and interest groups’ abilities to influence the flow of money in that system. They have the ability to regulate the flow of contributions to individual campaigns. Indeed, a direct effect of these organizations’ efforts to control the flow of money to some campaigns is that others are starved for cash and unable to compete for votes.

Communications and Voter Mobilization

Although politicians and political consultants continually refine the techniques they use to gauge the public’s mood, those used in the modern era are, for the most part, the same as those used in the era that preceded it. The major difference is that political parties and, to a lesser degree, interest groups have assumed larger roles in taking the electorate’s political pulse. Some of these organizations take polls to encourage prospective candidates to run for office. These same organizations also use polling data when formulating their own campaign strategies and deciding how to distribute their campaign resources. In addition, party committees and interest groups routinely disseminate the results of national surveys and other research through newsletters they send to candidates, the media, and political activists. These organizations also conduct polls in a limited number of competitive elections and share the results with the candidates in those contests in order to improve the campaigns’ decision making. Party and interest group polling has increased these organizations’ influence in contemporary elections.

With the exception of the introduction of Internet and satellite television uplinks, only incremental changes have taken place in the techniques campaigns use to communicate with voters. What have changed are the roles of political parties and outside groups in assisting candidates gain access to, and in some cases utilize, these techniques. In the 1980s the parties’ congressional campaign committees and some state legislative committees helped candidates with communicating with voters in several ways. Some candidates received basic party issue packages that also were sent to political activists or were given the use of generic television ads and assistance in customizing them with voiceovers and text. Others benefited from more individualized assistance, including extensive issue and opposition research, help with message development, and the use of party facilities and media experts in writing, recording, editing, and disseminating television, radio, and direct mail advertisements.¹⁹

These organizations continue to provide generic communications assistance to many candidates, but changes in technology have made it more cost-effective for candidates and consultants to tape and edit their own campaign ads. The typical House campaign, for instance, devotes more than one-third of its budget to broadcast media advertising (see Figure 2.2). Another one-fifth is committed to direct mail, campaign literature, and other communications. The remainder is committed to staff salaries, fundraising, other forms of overhead, and research.

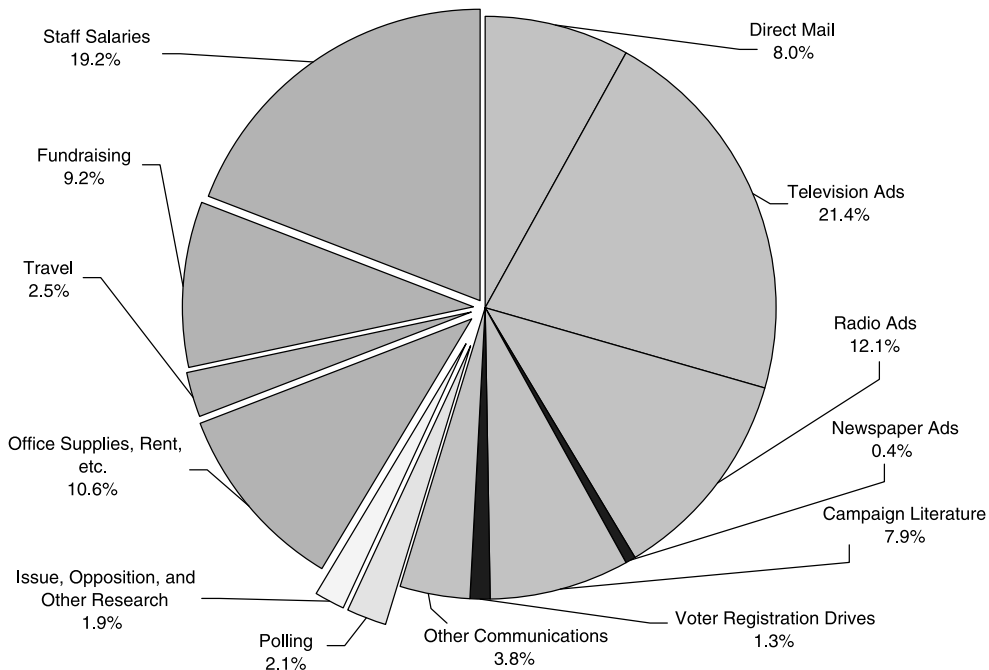


Figure 2.2. The Budget of a Typical House Campaign

Source: Paul S. Herrnson, *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2004).

Note: Figures don't add to 100% due to rounding.

Parties continue to provide candidates with access to generic television ads, and they furnish access to satellite technology to candidates, mostly congressional incumbents, in Washington, D.C., that enables the candidates to interact in real time with their constituents. Most of the communications assistance that parties provide directly to contemporary campaigns involves furnishing candidates competing in close races with timely feedback on campaign ads. Using streaming video on the Internet, party communications staff can typically provide candidates with commentaries on their ads in a matter of hours, and sometimes even in minutes. In addition to the assistance they provide to campaign organizations, party committees (and some interest groups) also directly communicate with voters to influence the outcome of some elections.

Voter mobilization is a campaign activity that is often less candidate centered and involves substantial party and interest group involvement. The transference of funds raised by national party organizations to state and local party committees has helped local party organizations playing a greater role in these efforts. Similarly, financial and organizational improvements made by labor unions, conservative Christian groups, and other organizations have enabled them to play a larger role in mobilizing voters. The Democratic Party and labor unions had long established a coordinated voter mobilization program, which gave many Democratic candidates an advantage over Republicans, even when the former were outspent. The Republicans responded in 2002 by organizing their own nationally directed voter mobilization program, referred to as the "72 Hour Task Force." In 2004 the Republican Party took another step forward by introducing micro-targeting techniques developed in marketing research into the political arena. Micro-targeting involves creating voter files that combine previous election results with individuals' voter turnout histories, contact information, and demographic and consumer

information that is correlated with political preferences.²⁰ These data are used to identify partisan voters, and in some cases swing voters, and target them for personalized voter contacts to get them to vote.

The Impact of Campaigns on Election Outcomes

The pressures of modern campaigns are enormous. They consume time and energy as well as intellectual and financial resources. Successful campaigns for president, and statewide, as well as many congressional and some local offices typically require the analysis of massive amounts of data on previous voting patterns, the commissioning of polls to gauge voters' views about the issues and the candidates, the formulation of a campaign strategy, and the raising and spending of campaign funds. Attracting endorsements and free media coverage is also very important. Campaigns also require strong grassroots organizations for voter registration and GOTV drives. Political parties, labor unions, some trade associations, organizations associated with the religious right, and other causes assist some candidates with voter mobilization efforts.

Nevertheless, candidates do not begin (or end) the election season as equals when it comes to performing the tasks associated with campaigning or attracting the support of the media, parties, or interest groups. The power of incumbency provides overwhelming advantages to current officeholders. Some of these advantages come into play during the campaign season; others are relevant well before a prospective challenger may even decide on whether to run.

First, merely holding office provides most incumbents with resources they can use to strengthen their visibility and ties to their constituents well before the campaign season starts.²¹ Pre-election efforts at generating name recognition and constituent approval provide incumbents with significant advantages once the election begins. Members of Congress, for example, are able to call on their congressional staff to help draft speeches, conduct research, write letters to constituents, perform casework, and win funding for federal projects or favorable tax considerations for local industries—allowing the member to claim credit for all of these efforts.²² Free mailings, unlimited telephone service to home districts, Internet web sites, and access to television and radio recording studios, interpreting services, and graphic services assist members in broadcasting their accomplishments. The news media typically give the activities of sitting officeholders a reasonable amount of free news coverage. Although most of these efforts are considered part of a legislator's job, not campaigning, they enable members of Congress to increase their popularity among constituents, which, in turn, provides tremendous benefits once the campaign season begins.²³

Second, as many challengers know all too well, incumbents have a clear advantage in campaign funding. Political action committees (PACs) and wealthy individual donors prefer to support incumbents more than challengers because they see incumbents as solid investments.²⁴ In the case of House incumbents, for example, the fact that more than 90% routinely win reelection encourages campaign donors who wish to influence public policy to funnel their resources to legislators who have a near-permanent hold on power rather than those who have little chance of acquiring it. During the 2006 congressional elections, for instance, incumbent House members of both parties raised roughly three times more money than their general election challengers. PACs were particularly generous with incumbents. Those in two-party contested elections raised, on average, nearly \$531,000 from PACs, as opposed to the less than \$43,000 raised by House challengers.²⁵ Additionally, many incumbents are able to use surplus money at the end of an election to finance skeletal campaign organizations between election cycles. These campaign organizations then fend off challengers, communicate with supporters, and prepare for the next election. Despite enacting various campaign finance reforms over the years, incumbents have perpetuated an election system that works to their advantage.

Third, when involved in close races, incumbents can rely on a disproportionate share of money and manpower from their party organizations and interest groups. Local party committees often provide assistance with registering voters, GOTV drives, direct mail, and providing campaign volunteers. State party committees help with other voter mobilization activities and money. While national party committees frequently provide information about voters, issue and opposition research, assistance with campaign communications, and fundraising to most candidates in competitive elections, protecting incumbents is their number one priority. They typically distribute substantial resources to incumbents in danger of losing their seats. They also frequently make independent expenditures designed to undermine whatever headway a challenger has made in building voter support. PACs and other interest groups also marshal their resources to come to the aid of incumbents in hotly contested contests. Often taking the form of television, radio, and direct mail advertisements, this spending is usually comparative or negative in tone and intended to undermine an opponent rather than enhance the reputation of the preferred candidate.²⁶

Despite their near overwhelming advantages not all members of the US House, the US Senate, state legislatures, or the occupants of other offices win reelection. The benefits of incumbency do not automatically ensure success. In some situations, the national political climate combines with the local conditions and the efforts of individual candidates to enable a challenger to unseat even the most entrenched incumbent. Newly gerrymandered districts can also cause difficulties for incumbents. They have historically been less favorable to incumbents than other districts—although the House districts drawn following the 2000 census seem to have had the opposite influence.²⁷ Officeholders implicated in scandal are occasionally subject to voter backlash.²⁸ Moreover, a strong party agenda can force incumbents to confront difficult issues, which sometimes turns them out of office in a tidal wave that washes in large numbers of the opposing party. During the 1994 elections, for example, Republicans railed against what they labeled a White House and Democratic-controlled Congress that were corrupt and out of step with voters. They offered as an alternative a national platform called the “Contract with America” and succeeded in winning control of both Houses of Congress for the first time in forty years. In 2006 the Democrats took a page from the Republican playbook by offering their “Six for ’06” campaign agenda that outlined six broad legislative goals, along with a promise for a new direction on the Iraq war. Combined with their attacks on the Republican-led administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina and the scandals that roiled the Republican-controlled Congress, the Democrats were able to win back both houses of Congress for the first time in twelve years. It is important to note that these instances are more the exception than the norm. In general, few challengers are able to mount the sort of campaign needed to overcome the advantages of incumbency and changes in party control of Congress have been relatively rare.

Conclusion

Political campaigns in the United States have progressed through many stages, often in response to changes in the larger strategic environment in which elections are conducted. Early in US history, before the days of mass suffrage, campaigns consisted primarily of informal caucusing among those few political elites who enjoyed the right to vote. With the rise of mass suffrage and strong party organizations, the party-centered era took hold. During this period, local party machines dominated most aspects of political campaigning, including candidate selection, recruitment, campaign strategy, and the implementation of the campaign itself. Regulatory reform and broader systemic change in society resulted in candidates becoming more self-selected and campaigns becoming more candidate centered. Political parties and interest groups responded to the candidate-centered system, finding ways to assume important supplement roles

in elections. Despite this last set of changes, most elections in the United States remain candidate centered and uncompetitive. Top-of-the-ticket races, such as presidential and gubernatorial contests, may generate strong competition, but the vast majority of congressional, state legislative, and local elections usually begin and end with the incumbent enjoying a commanding lead.

Notes

The views expressed here are those of the authors and not of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or any other agency of the United States government.

- 1 Paul S. Herrnson, *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2004).
- 2 Portions of this section are drawn from Paul S. Herrnson, "The Evolution of Political Campaigns," in *Guide to Political Campaigns in America*, ed. Paul S. Herrnson (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2005), 19–36.
- 3 See Robert L. Dudley and Alan R. Gitelson, *American Elections: The Rules Matter* (New York: Longman Publishers, 2002); and Harold F. Bass, Jr., "Partisan Rules, 1946–1996," in *Partisan Approaches to Postwar American Politics*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 1998), 220–70.
- 4 See Larry Sabato, *The Rise of the Political Consultants: New Ways of Winning Elections* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).
- 5 A. James Reichley, *The Life of the Parties: A History of American Political Parties* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), ch. 7.
- 6 See John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- 7 See David Menefee-Libey, *The Triumph of Campaign-Centered Politics* (New York: Chatham House, 2000).
- 8 See Robert J. Dinkin, *Campaigning in America: A History of Election Practices* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989); Sandy L. Maisel, *Parties and Elections in America: The Electoral Process*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); and Dennis W. Johnson, "The Business of Political Consulting," in *Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections*, ed. James A. Thurber and Candice J. Nelson (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 37–52.
- 9 See David A. Dulio, *For Better or Worse? How Political Consultants are Changing Elections in the United States* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2004).
- 10 Sandy Bergo, *Campaign Consultants: The Price of Democracy* (Center for Public Integrity, Washington, D.C., 2006).
- 11 Herrnson, *Congressional Elections*, 117–24, 157–61.
- 12 Stephen K. Medvic, *Political Consultants in U.S. Congressional Elections* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 115.
- 13 Medvic, *Political Consultants in U.S. Congressional Elections*, 115, 129–32; Herrnson, *Congressional Elections*, 237–8; and Paul S. Herrnson, "Campaign Professionalism and Fundraising in Congressional Elections," *Journal of Politics* 54 (1992): 859–70.
- 14 Paul S. Herrnson, *Party Campaigning in the 1980s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); and L. Sandy Maisel, Cherie Maestas, and Walter J. Stone, "The Party Role in Congressional Competition," in *The Parties Respond: Changes in American Parties and Campaigns*, 4th ed., ed. L. Sandy Maisel (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 121–38.
- 15 Herrnson, *Congressional Elections*, 105–16; and Robin Kolodny, "Electoral Partnerships: Political Consultants and Political Parties," in *Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections*, ed. James A. Thurber and Candice J. Nelson (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 110–32. See also Robin Kolodny and Angela Logan, "Political Consultants and the Extension of Party Goals," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31 (2) (1998): 155–9.
- 16 Herrnson, *Congressional Elections*, 96–131.
- 17 Lauren W. Whittington, "DCCC Fundraising Surges," *Roll Call*, April 19, 2007, http://www.rollcall.com/issues/52_111/news/18060-1.html.
- 18 House Democrats assign biannual dues on a sliding scale. Those in leadership owe \$600,000, for instance, while rank-and-file members sitting on nonexclusive committees pay \$125,000. Members of the five exclusive committees—Appropriations, Ways and Means, Energy and Commerce, Rules, and Financial Services—each owe \$150,000, while the chairs of those committees are responsible for \$300,000.
- 19 Herrnson, *Party Campaigning in the 1980s*, 46–111.

- 20 Matt Bai, "The Multilevel Marketing of the President," *New York Times Magazine*, April 25, 2004.
- 21 Roger H. Davidson, Walter J. Oleszek, and Francis E. Lee, *Congress and Its Members*, 11th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2008), 70–2.
- 22 See Morris P. Fiorina, *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 53–8.
- 23 Michael John Burton and Daniel M. Shea, *Campaign Mode: Strategic Vision in Congressional Elections* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 139.
- 24 Herrnson, *Congressional Elections*, ch. 6; Peter L. Francia, John C. Green, Paul S. Herrnson, Lynda W. Powell, and Clyde Wilcox, *The Financiers of Congressional Elections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 99–121.
- 25 Herrnson, *Congressional Elections*, 171, 181.
- 26 Ken Goldstein and Joel Rivlin, "Political Advertising in the 2002 and 2004 Elections," University of Wisconsin at Madison, Wisconsin Advertising Project, 2002, updated February 2005, ch. 5, www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising/Analysis%20of%20the%202000%20elections.htm.
- 27 However, the districts drawn following the 2000 elections form an important exception to that generalization. See, e.g. Herrnson, *Congressional Elections*, 242–3.
- 28 See, for example, Gary C. Jacobson and Michael Dimock, "Checking Out: The Effects of Bank Overdrafts on the 1992 House Election," *American Journal of Political Science* 38 (1994): 601–24.