

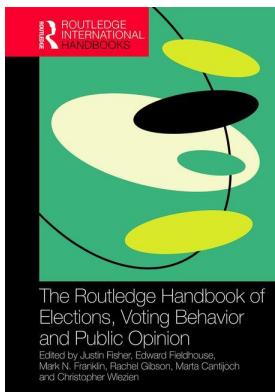
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CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES, MEDIA, AND VOTERS

The fourth era of political communication

Holli A. Semetko and Hubert Tworzecki

A number of interrelated developments have transformed election campaigns and, taken together, have ushered in a new, fourth, era in political communication. Advancing technology and the new uses to which it is put in campaigns and elections is a key feature of this fourth era, which can be distinguished from the influential three-era framework of political communication of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Farrell, 1996; Farrell and Webb, 2000; Norris, 2000; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002). The fourth era began to take shape with the rapid growth of social media from the mid-2000s.

From the perspective of advancing technology and the new uses to which it is put in campaigns and elections, three major developments distinguish the fourth era of political communication from the previous eras. One development is the rise of “big data”: a massive increase in the volume of electronically stored information about individuals, households and geographical units such as postal code zones, along with the hardware, tools and analytical techniques for deploying this information in campaign settings. A second major development is the turn toward news consumption via social media, which on the one hand has had a profoundly democratizing effect in that it gave an unprecedentedly large number of people a means of joining in national political discourse, but on the other hand – and, paradoxically, with ominous consequences for democracy – it has diminished the fact-checking and gate-keeping roles once played by political and media elites, giving free and very visible reign to falsehood, incivility and outright hate speech. An important related development is the impact of big data analytics on news flows, and the realization by key actors that these news flows can be gamed, including by what Howard (2012) calls “computational propaganda,” meaning automated “bots” and other algorithms that can catapult a message into a heralded “viral” or “trending” status that then feeds traditional news agendas. The third major development is “globalization” of campaigning, not only in the sense of growing similarity of strategies and techniques used throughout the world and across a wide range of economic, cultural and political contexts, but also in the sense of growing trans-national circulation of money, personnel, know-how and other campaign resources. While in the past this had usually meant Western (especially American) influence spreading to other countries, nowadays it can also mean the expertise and resources of non-democratic states being deployed in the West. An especially prominent example was Russia’s use of hackers during the 2016 US presidential election, a development described by the head of the National Security Agency as a “conscious effort by a nation-state to achieve a specific effect” (The Wall Street Journal, 2016).

The opportunities and challenges for candidates and parties on the campaign trail in this fourth era of political communication can be found in more countries, and among more political parties, than ever before. This is not only because of the global spread of technology to lower-income countries, but also because of the growth in the number of countries holding multi-party election campaigns, which now includes many states governed by what political scientists describe as “competitive authoritarian” regimes (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

Our discussion of the fourth era in political communication includes examples from recent campaigns in higher-income democracies in North America and Europe, India, a lower-income country with a rapidly growing economy, and Russia as an example of a competitive authoritarian regime. Across each of these contexts, the evidence points to growing sophistication among campaign strategists worldwide in the use of online tools for gathering voter data, managing campaign resources, mobilizing voters, rapidly generating new (mis)information and enhancing the effectiveness of political communication.

The eras of political campaigning

Periodizations that refer to several distinct “eras” of political campaigning began to appear in the literature around twenty years ago. Farrell (1996) and, later, Farrell and Webb (2000) and Schmitt-Beck and Farrell (2002) proposed that we ought to think about eras broadly corresponding to the newspaper age, the television age and the (then just emerging) digital age. A similar argument was made by Norris (2000), who identified pre-modern, modern and post-modern eras of campaigning and later redefined these as people-intensive, broadcast-based and internet-based eras (Norris, 2005). In all of these frameworks, each era was defined by a combination of factors including the organization of political parties, the nature of social and partisan alignments, the available technology of communication, the prevailing techniques of coordination, mobilization and feedback-gathering, as well as factors such as campaign costs, duration, staffing patterns and so forth.

In the case of the United States, the first era, spanning about a century and ending around 1950, relied on partisan printed press and, later, radio broadcasts, combined with “whistle-stop” tours by leaders and mostly decentralized campaigning operations, involving rallies and doorstep canvassing, ran by local activists. During the second era, from the 1950s to mid-1980s, parties and candidates relied heavily on being featured in news programs on network television (which back then was generally speaking non-partisan) for political messaging and campaign communication. The second era was also characterized by more centralization and greater professionalization of campaigns, which in turn entailed longer duration and rising costs. The third era – from the late 1980s to late 1990s – was that of the “permanent campaign,” characterized by “narrowcasting” of messages through direct mail and targeted television advertising and a return to decentralization, but with a vastly greater role (compared to the first era) played by professional consultants, pollsters and marketing specialists, all against the backdrop of dealigning electorates and fragmenting audiences as deregulation and new technologies – cable, satellite and early internet – led to a great expansion in the number of media outlets. Timing differences aside, this framework also applies to many other democracies besides the US.

The fourth era represents an evolutionary development and not a revolutionary break with the past. Some aspects – like the fact that campaigns are now heavily professionalized, expensive and pretty much permanent – are not changing. However, a number of features set the fourth era apart from its predecessor. As with the previous transitions, technological innovation is a big part of this evolutionary story, and in the case of the fourth era it involves new campaigning tools, techniques and capabilities opened up by the rise of “big data” technologies on the one

hand and the rise of social media as news distribution channels on the other. While it is true that social media have empowered ordinary citizens and made it possible for a much greater diversity of voices to be heard, in combination with big data they have also given campaign professionals the means of identifying potential supporters and bombarding them with messages with far greater precision than ever before, while at the same time giving them greater freedom to play fast and loose with the facts. In this world of “post-truth politics” (Viner, 2016), the line between factual information and opinion is increasingly blurred, and the recipients of campaign messages, ensconced in “information bubbles” courtesy of individually-tailored news feeds delivered to them by social media platforms, are not likely to encounter either authoritative corrections to deliberately spread falsehoods, or indeed any other information inconsistent with their tastes, sensibilities and political commitments.

And, last but by no means least, what makes the fourth era distinct is that political campaigning techniques have gone global in a way that was not the case in the past. In contrast to previous decades, these days almost all countries – even those run by strongman dictators – hold elections that superficially look the same as in democracies, use many of the same technologies of communication and mobilization, and sometimes are even managed by the very same professional advisors who also work in democracies. However, far from representing a *de facto* capitulation of authoritarianism to democratic norms, the fourth era has also been characterized by increasingly widespread use of manipulation and misinformation techniques in campaigning originally developed in authoritarian settings. This development stands in sharp contrast to past eras during which observers noticed – in the alleged worldwide “Americanization” of campaign techniques (Plasser, 2000) – that know-how was spreading in one direction only.

Political campaigns and big data

We begin with a look at one set of consequences of technological change for political campaigning, namely the rapidly falling costs of digital storage, along with the development of hardware and software capable of analyzing vast quantities of information about individuals, households and geographical units such as electoral districts or postal code zones. Of course, various forms of mass-scale data collection and processing have existed for decades, and arguably can be traced all the way back to the use of paper punch cards in the 1890 US census. But data storage remained limited and expensive well into the modern era, and even during the 1970s and 1980s the mainframe computers of that period had to make do with reel-to-reel tape drives that could hold only about 200 megabytes per tape. In practical terms, this meant that, although some experimentation with new campaigning tools such as computer databases of donors, voters or volunteers began back in the 1970s, it was only about twenty years ago when large-scale deployment of these new technologies became both economically and technologically viable.

Moves toward the use of “big data” in election campaigns began in the 1990s, first in the United States, then in other industrial democracies, and finally in other parts of the world. The United States was a frontrunner in these efforts for a number of reasons. Under US election laws, candidates and parties must overwhelmingly rely on private rather than public financing, which has meant that the demands of fundraising have been among the major drivers of technological innovation, closely followed by the ever-present need to maximize the efficiency of GOTV (get-out-the-vote) efforts across large geographical areas with relatively low population densities. In the mid-1990s, both major US parties began to put together national databases of potential supporters by compiling information from voter registration files, census records, membership lists of issue advocacy organizations (NRA, AARP and so forth), supplementing it

with commercially-available data on income, assets and even shopping habits from credit-reporting agencies. The Help America Vote Act (HAVA), passed by Congress in 2002, and requiring states to maintain computerized, state-wide voter registration lists (which are considered public records and are made available to campaigns), helped to speed these efforts along. In the event, the Republican Party's project called Voter Vault was ready by 2002. The Democrats' big data initiatives were called Demzilla and DataMart, and were first used in the 2004 presidential election (Gertner, 2004). In 2008 and 2012, the Democrats contracted with Catalyst, a company that served the Obama campaign and most of the party's campaigns at various levels, along with affiliated organizations and interest groups. Catalyst maintains a continually updated national database of voters, in which each voter is listed with more than 700 predicted characteristics. The targeting database is most actively used by competitive campaigns across House, Senate and gubernatorial races for large-scale canvassing operations (Hersh, 2015). Catalyst also partners with NGP-VAN (Voter Activation Network), which gathers the data to provide an easily accessible portal for campaign strategists. Last but not least, the past several years have seen the entry into this market of private firms that sell individual-level data as a commercial product. Some of these firms (e.g., Nationbuilder) are non-partisan and make their services available to anyone, from national political campaigns to local community activists. Others, like Cambridge Analytica (CA), which in 2016 was retained by the Trump campaign and the Brexit "leave" campaign, specialize in targeting only one side of the political spectrum. According to press reports, CA claims to have: "as many as 3,000 to 5,000 data points on each of us, be it voting histories or full-spectrum demographics – age, income, debt, hobbies, criminal histories, purchase histories, religious leanings, health concerns, gun ownership, car ownership, homeownership – from consumer-data giants," and in the 2016 US presidential campaign used these data to produce "microtargeted" Facebook ads, such as those intended to depress turnout in selected areas, such as in "Miami's Little Haiti neighborhood with messages about the Clinton Foundation's troubles in Haiti ..." (Funk, 2016).

Despite these technological advances, well into the 2000s many American campaigns for national or high-level state office continued to be run in a fairly traditional mold by professional consultants skeptical of (or not trained in) quantitative, data-driven approaches. In any case, the avalanche of data that was becoming available at the time could not be fully exploited because the necessary "predictive analytics" algorithms aimed at identifying the most persuadable voters had not yet been developed or tested (Nickerson and Rogers, 2014). Indeed, it was not until 2008 when Barack Obama's presidential campaign fully utilized data-driven strategies to engage citizens (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Yet, as Hersh (2015) reveals, these first data-driven campaigns were far more successful at mobilizing existing supporters than at persuading new or undecided voters. And as Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2012) demonstrates, grassroots door-to-door canvassing and fundraising continued to be very important in Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns.

Similar technological advances have been taking place in campaigns in other countries. For example, the Conservative Party in Britain purchased the Voter Vault software from the Republicans and used it for planning campaign activities during the 2005 general election. At roughly the same time, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats created their own, in-house data/software products (Foster, 2010). Comparable efforts have been under way for over a decade in Canada, with the Liberals, Conservatives and the NDP all starting to develop voter databases in the mid-2000s. In India's 2014 national election, in contrast to the incumbent center-left Indian National Congress (INC) Party that campaigned largely as in past elections in terms of their use of social media, which was not part of their strategy, the opposition center-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced in 2013 that it had identified 160 constituencies ripe for a digital strategy.

The BJP's new digital campaign cell implemented that strategy supported by online donations, many from Indians living abroad, and made social media another layer of strategic messaging beyond the traditional advertising and campaigning budget. The BJP not only won in these digital constituencies, the party also came into office with an unprecedented absolute majority of seats.

As is often the case with rapidly advancing technologies, the development of safeguards against potential misuse – including appropriate standards for data security, voter privacy, transparency about what data are gathered and how they are used – has lagged behind. At the time of writing, the story of how state-sponsored Russian hackers breached the Democratic Party's voter databases for the presumed purpose of meddling in the 2016 US presidential election is front-page news (Lichtblau, 2016), having incidentally revealed not only the weakness of existing regulatory frameworks for keeping this kind of information safe but also the problematic cybersecurity infrastructure. Such legislation as does currently exist in this area has been crafted with little publicity by politicians and, rather unsurprisingly, tends to reflect their priorities. As Hersh (2015) argues, US politicians are particularly interested in enhancing their micro-targeting capabilities by designing legislation to build better databases for future campaigns. Indeed in one of the rapid post-election assessments on the most recent 2015 Canadian election, Steve Patten (2015, p. 15) points out that party databases are not governed by Canada's privacy laws, and argues that:

data-driven micro-targeting shifts the focus of partisan campaigns from the work of public persuasion and the building of a national consensus toward what could be described as manipulative exercises in private persuasion ... [and therefore is] not making a positive contribution to Canadian democracy.

The social media revolution

The internet and social media in particular have also transformed political campaigning in recent years. It is of course true that in some versions of the three-era framework, such as in Norris (2005), the third era was recast as the era of the internet. However, at the time – the first half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, prior to the rise of social media as a mass phenomenon – online campaign communications mostly involved broadcast-style “one-to-many” message flows from media outlets and party/candidate websites to audiences of news consumers. What has changed since then – and what warrants the claim that a new, fourth era of campaigning is at hand – is the rising importance of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and their counterparts in other countries) as content delivery mechanisms for political news and information. Crucially, these mechanisms have empowered, albeit in different ways, both the political and media elites and the general public.

For the elites – and this is where the “big data” and social media aspects of the story meet – the change is mostly about the “analytics”: the ability to gain precise knowledge of what content people actually like to consume, and to deliver more of the same in an individually-tailored manner. As one internet media company CEO put it in a widely-quoted phrase, the key thing to keep in mind about this brave new world of communication is “not the immediacy of it, or the low costs, but the measurability” (Petre, 2015). For media companies, measurability – knowing exactly who clicks on what content, and linking it to information about his or her income, place of residence and so on – is important because it helps to increase market share in targeted demographic groups, which in turn helps to sell advertising. For politicians and campaign professionals, measurability is important because it generates instant feedback and lets

them fine-tune their messages and deliver them with unprecedented precision to the kinds of voters (e.g., “undecideds” in competitive districts) whose support will matter the most on polling day.

As for the general public, compared to past eras, social media platforms now provide vastly greater opportunities for individuals and groups to participate in a broad range of political activities. Today’s national election campaigns feature a diversity of voices and opinions unimaginable two decades ago, and can be experienced in a more immediate, participatory sense by anyone with an internet connection. Furthermore, social media platforms have transformed election campaigns by lessening the perceived distance between politicians and their constituents by allowing citizens to correspond with prominent political figures directly (e.g. via Twitter), publicly and in near real time. Yet another consequence has been the way in which campaign communication environments have been transformed by the near-total disappearance of barriers to entry into the world of broadly-defined political journalism, so that nowadays almost literally anyone – regardless of background, formal education or knowledge of politics – can contribute to national discussion of broadly-defined public affairs in ways that range from recording a YouTube video, to writing a blog entry, to “sharing” somebody else’s post with one’s Facebook friends.

However, although the social media revolution has produced tangible benefits for both elites and ordinary citizens, its overall impact could ultimately prove deleterious to everyone and, indeed, to the well-being of democracy itself. There is growing evidence that the kind of information people consume online is increasingly a function of what appears in their personal news feeds, because it is either shared with them by their friends or is generated automatically by algorithms that push “trending” stories. This model of communication leads to two kinds of problems: first, it can give rapid and widespread visibility to outright falsehoods – such as the story that Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump’s candidacy, which was shared almost a million times on Facebook (Isaac, 2016) – planted either as pranks, as a way to make money from page clicks (Silverman and Alexander, 2016) or as part of a deliberate misinformation strategy by domestic or foreign political actors. And second, it makes this misinformation difficult to correct because, as Sunstein (2001) predicted at the turn of the twenty-first century, personalized news means that people can live in “echo chambers” or “information bubbles” that effectively cut them off from unwelcome facts and disagreeable opinions. These developments have been linked (Pew Research Center, 2016) to a polarization of attitudes, the hollowing out of the political center and the rise of radical populist parties and movements, oftentimes with a deeply illiberal bent, all of which set politics of the fourth era apart from the bland, accommodative centrism that prevailed in many advanced democracies through the 1990s and early 2000s. The changes are so profound that we are only now beginning to recognize their cumulative impact. As President Obama said in conversation with the journalist David Remnick:

The new media ecosystem “means everything is true and nothing is true ... And the capacity to disseminate misinformation, wild conspiracy theories, to paint the opposition in wildly negative light without any rebuttal ... make it very difficult to have a common conversation.”

(Remnick, 2016)

To be sure, the actual magnitude and impact of these effects is hotly debated by political scientists and communication scholars. There is much that we do not know, since much of the available evidence is anecdotal in nature, as exemplified by this widely circulated post-Brexit referendum comment by the British internet activist Tom Steinberg:

I am actively searching through Facebook for people celebrating the Brexit leave victory, but the filter bubble is SO strong ... that I can't find anyone who is happy despite the fact that over half the country is clearly jubilant today.

(Quoted in Viner, 2016)

Of course, proving these kinds of claims empirically on nationally-representative samples is another matter, and plenty of work remains to be done in this regard. It may well be that the information bubble effect (both online and with traditional media) is limited to the most politically-engaged segment of the population (Prior, 2013), but then this is the segment that is the most motivated and ultimately the most influential in deciding election outcomes.

While developments in the US and UK provide examples of Facebook's echo chamber effect, India now follows the US as the number two country in the world with the most Facebook users (n.a., Top 10). As internet access becomes more readily available in rural India, it remains an open question as to whether the country will also experience the echo chamber phenomenon. A decade after India's 2004 national election, when internet access was patchy even though many parties had websites (Tekwani and Shetty, 2007), access in major cities had increased significantly. A massive digital divide still remains between urban and rural, with rural areas often lacking electricity. Despite this, most have access to TV and viewers learned in 2013 that a smartphone was not necessary to be on Facebook from a popular ad campaign cosponsored with Airtel, clips from which can be found on YouTube. Facebook's presence in India was already highly visible in the month prior to the official launch of the 2014 national election, when the company purchased India's most popular messaging service WhatsApp for \$19 billion. In the spring 2014 national election campaign, traditional media quoted top party spokespersons appearing on unprecedented Facebook town halls to take questions from users in what was described as the country's first internet election. BJP leader Narendra Modi, himself an avid Twitter user, often crowdsourced his speech topics on Twitter as he was flying into one of his five campaign stops a day (Price, 2015), and Mr. Modi also appeared in 100 cities simultaneously by delivering a speech in a 3D hologram. A study of campaign engagement in 2014 in three major cities (Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai) found that sharing information face-to-face and electronically (defined to include cell phones with SMS as well as email and social media) were both significant influences on political engagement with each of the three main parties' campaigns (Neyazi et al., 2016). The example of India is also relevant to countries in the Global South, such as Brazil and Indonesia, that now follow the US and India as numbers three and four on the list of countries with the most Facebook users. Although internet use remains too underdeveloped for the Facebook echo chamber effect in the Brexit referendum to impact electoral thinking across India, it nevertheless remains important to consider the echo chamber hypothesis in urban areas where rates of internet access are much higher.

But it is not just an echo chamber effect that might be at work. Another unintended consequence of the social media revolution for political campaigning is that the line between facts and opinion has become increasingly blurred. Of course politicians have always attempted to cherry-pick and interpret factual information about economic conditions, crime rates, foreign relations and so on in a manner beneficial to themselves. However, in communication environments dominated by traditional media outlets, especially those with strong norms of impartiality and journalistic professionalism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), there was a stronger likelihood that filtering and gatekeeping institutions, such as the front pages of major newspapers, would help to maintain a kind of baseline knowledge of "how things are going" in the country, and that politicians would face consequences for speaking blatant untruths. So one of the great paradoxes of the social media revolution is, while more people than ever before have been empowered to

have their voices heard, the resulting “unmooring” of political discussion from a common version of the facts has made democratic debate more difficult. This problem exists in all of the aforementioned countries, but is especially evident in weaker democracies and hybrid regimes, where impartial traditional media outlets have either never existed or have been forced to toe the government line.

Global diffusion

Although much of the literature on changes in campaign technologies and strategies inevitably focuses on advanced industrial democracies, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that when we discuss the fourth era of political campaigning, we are considering a truly global phenomenon and, indeed, an increasingly global industry with a pool of ideas, techniques and human talent employed across a wide range of political regime types. There are three main reasons for this. First, in the past quarter-century the worldwide mix of political regimes has changed significantly in the direction of greater competitiveness. Until the 1990s, the so-called “closed” authoritarianisms (i.e., those that suppressed all political competition) constituted the plurality (around 45 percent) of all political regimes, followed by democracies (at around 38 percent). Today, democracies are the most common type (around 55 percent), followed by so-called “competitive-” or “electoral-authoritarian” regimes that make up around 30 percent of the total (Miller, 2015; Wahman et al., 2013; Cheibub et al., 2010). Although political science has struggled to define competitive authoritarianisms with precision, these are sometimes described as political regimes in which, even though the “rules of the game” may be rigged in favor of the incumbents, political competition is real enough that on election night “the incumbents are forced to sweat” (Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 12). By extension, elections in these hybrid regimes are no mere smokescreens or empty rituals, but meaningful (if deeply flawed) contests for a share of political power.

Indeed, political science scholarship increasingly sees elections as an integral component of non-democratic rule. Most such regimes – even those of a decidedly hardline, non-competitive variety – hold elections of one sort or another. A number of reasons for why they do so have been suggested, including as a mechanism for the distribution of benefits to elites and favored groups in society, for coopting potential opposition, for collecting information (both about the public’s mood and about the competence of the regime’s own cadres), for demonstrating strength and invincibility and for generating the appearance of popular legitimacy both domestically and internationally (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009). It could be argued that, after the fall of communism and the decline of comprehensive ideological alternatives to democracy, more and more authoritarian rulers have resigned themselves to institutionalizing electoral competition at least in theory, even as they continued to subvert it in practice.

Second, the world has become interconnected to such an extent that pulling up the proverbial drawbridge is no longer an option even for non-democracies. Today, North Korean-style economic, cultural and ideational isolation is an aberration, but not too long ago it was the reality in many authoritarian regimes, including in the bulk of countries of the Soviet bloc. As an illustrative example, it is worth recalling that in the early 1980s the Soviet authorities simply dismantled much of the international telecommunications infrastructure, literally digging up telephone cables to eliminate direct dialing calls to the United States and other countries (United Press International, 1982). In 2016, such a cutoff would be regarded as economically suicidal, which suggests that today’s authoritarian and hybrid regimes are caught in a classic “dictator’s dilemma” of trying to balance their natural inclination to control information against the demands of participation in the global economy (Wintrobe, 2007).

And third, in this increasingly interconnected world, it made less and less sense for candidates and parties in different countries to reinvent the proverbial wheel when it came to political campaigning. Scholars have long wondered whether post-authoritarian countries, especially the so-called “third wave” democratizers in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America and South-East Asia, would follow in the footsteps of older democracies or trace their own distinct paths. Of course an exact retracing was never on the cards given vast differences between the West in the last years of the nineteenth century and the new democracies a century later in everything from the character of social cleavages to the presence of new communication technologies. Nonetheless, it was not beyond the realm of possibility that, when it came to election campaigns, these new democracies would draw on their own traditions and cultural repertoires. In the event, borrowing of campaign techniques from more advanced democracies was commonplace, and this tendency has only become stronger during the fourth era as rapid expansion and falling costs of online technologies have placed the same kinds of tools and techniques within reach of campaign professionals everywhere.

Nowadays, however, the borrowing also takes place in the other direction as well, with techniques that originated in competitive authoritarian settings eventually finding their way into election campaigns in democracies. A good case in point is provided by Russia, whose propagandists have in recent years developed a wide range of so-called “political technologies,” meaning tools ranging from deliberately polluting the information environment with fake news, to promoting conspiracy theories, to flooding social media with relentless negativity spread by automated or human “trolls,” to more old-fashioned techniques of pressuring journalists and media companies such as the “carrot of corruption in conjunction with the stick of ‘compromat’ (compromising materials)” (Greene, 2014). A number of these techniques were then picked up by candidates and parties contesting elections in other countries in the post-Soviet space, including Georgia, Ukraine and Estonia, then made an appearance in elections in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe, eventually spreading to the West and making a very visible appearance with the “post-truth” approach to campaigning in the 2016 Brexit referendum and the US presidential election of the same year.

Conclusions

It is worth remembering that it was only 2004 when Facebook was launched in a Harvard dorm room. In less than a decade, Facebook has come to define the pinnacle of success for every large and small social media platform around the world today. Campaigns have changed dramatically with the growth of the internet and social media, shifting from primarily top-down models of party and media influence to include many significant online citizen-driven episodes that may indeed influence party strategies and electoral outcomes. In campaigns from the Americas to Asia, young people appear to be driving social media use and therefore social change, but the world’s “competitive authoritarian regimes” are also increasingly skilled in the use of this technology to forestall challenges to their rule.

The fourth era of political communication began to take shape with the growth of social media in the first decade of this century. In this chapter, we discussed the three major developments that set apart the fourth era of political communication from the previous three in terms of political campaigning: the rise of big data, changing communication flows with the growing use of social media and the globalization of campaigning technology and techniques. We provided evidence on these developments from democracies such as the UK, Canada, India and the US as well as Russia, an example of a competitive authoritarian regime. Elections in competitive authoritarian regimes account for most of the steep rise in the number of

elections around the world and are therefore of great interest to political scientists and political consultants.

For better or worse – and in this case, definitely for the worse – campaigning today is a global industry in which techniques shown to be effective in one country spread to others. Political *dramaturgiia* is no longer just a Russian phenomenon. Campaigns consciously and unashamedly “unmoored from the facts” – aided by “personal information snowflake” patterns of news consumption via social media, and abetted by party-aligned newspapers and TV outlets – could be observed in recent years as far and wide as in the 2015 Polish parliamentary elections (Tworzecki and Markowski, 2015), the 2016 Brexit referendum (Viner, 2016) and the 2016 US presidential election (Belluz, 2016). Understanding these developments and their long-term consequences represents a major future challenge for political science.

As technology and publicly-available data combine to provide increasingly sophisticated micro-targeting algorithms, observers in some countries such as Canada are calling for legislation to protect voters’ privacy and rights to information about what political parties know about them. In other countries such as India, and elsewhere in the Global South, rural voters await the arrival of reliable electricity and internet access.

Campaigns have not yet been able to custom tailor social media messages to the sensibilities of individual recipients, yet this sort of capability may not be too far off in the future. We may not know now what new opportunities will be delivered by artificial intelligence (AI) for campaigning in 2020, but we can expect that those who utilize AI effectively will be more successful than those who do not. We anticipate that efforts to persuade politically by algorithm and automation will grow substantially in both democracies and competitive authoritarian regimes in future campaigns, with far-reaching implications for both political theory and political practice.

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