Campaigns and Elections

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What I hope you learn today

The fundamentals of an election are much better predictors of the winner than idiosyncratic events. Insofar as campaigns affect election outcomes, they do so by influencing whether people turnout (not by changing people's vote choice).

Importance of name recognition.
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- Importance of name recognition
Outline

1. Predicting Elections
2. Do campaigns matter?
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Most political science (and social science more broadly) research is aimed at explaining how the world works, not predicting the future. Elections is one area where political scientists regularly apply their theories of how the world works to the task of predicting outcomes.

FiveThirtyEight’s Senate Forecast
Each party’s chance of controlling the Senate, through Election Day

- 76% chance for one party
- 24% chance for the other party
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Fundamentals of the election

Presidential (and to a great extent Senate, House, governor, etc.) elections are highly predictable on the basis of “the fundamentals”:

- Incumbency: incumbent presidents seeking reelection have won 79% of the time since 1900.
- State of the economy: Incumbent presidents running for reelection in times of peace and prosperity are almost guaranteed to win.
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- Incumbency: incumbent presidents seeking reelection have won 79% of the time since 1900
- State of the economy
- War and peace

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Forecasting presidential elections

Notice that none of these “fundamentals” have anything to do with the campaign and are largely out of the control of individual candidates.
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Because they’re so strongly tied to election outcomes, it’s possible to get highly accurate forecasts for presidential elections well before the fall campaign starts.

One well-known forecasting model is Hibbs’s “bread and peace” model, which predicts the incumbent party’s presidential vote share based on income growth and military fatalities in the preceding year.
The “Bread and Peace” Model and the 2012 Election

![Graph showing the relationship between real income growth and military fatalities combined on the x-axis and the incumbent share of two-party vote on the y-axis. The graph includes data points for various election years from 1952 to 2012, with a trend line that suggests a positive correlation. The 2012 prediction for Obama's vote share is indicated as 47.5%.](image-url)
The “Bread and Peace” Model and the 2012 Election

Actual 2012 vote for Obama: 52%

2012 prediction for Obama: 47.5%
Wait, what?

If we can accurately predict the outcome of an election in the summer before, does this mean that the campaigns don’t actually matter?

Are we just wasting a ton of time, money, and attention during the campaign?
Alternative approach to predicting elections
Alternative approach to predicting elections

50.8% +0.4 since Oct. 30

Popular vote

48.3% -0.2 since Oct. 30

50%
If campaigns don't matter, then why is there so much fluctuation in the polls?
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Do campaigns matter?

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1 Predicting Elections

2 Do campaigns matter?
Do campaigns matter?

Why campaigns might not matter

There's virtually no evidence that debates, speeches, gaffes, etc. impact an election outcome as much as conventional wisdom suggests they do.

Voters don't pay much attention to the campaign.

Of the 130 million people who will vote this November, most of them have not any thought to the election yet.

It's virtually impossible to persuade a Democrat to vote for a Republican, or vice versa.

And despite popular narratives about independents, only 10-12% of Americans are truly independent in their voting habits.

People who work/volunteer for campaigns are not ideologically moderate, so why should we think they would be good convincing moderates to come to their side?
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Why campaigns might matter

Campaigns force people to think about politics and provide information about the candidates. Policy beliefs of the candidates, but the equally important how voters learn about candidates' personalities and temperament during the campaign.

Campaigns help build name recognition. Not as important in a presidential race, but perhaps the most important factor in lower-down races, like U.S. House or state legislature elections.

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So do campaigns matter?

The "bread and peace" model—and others like it—are built on data from elections in which a campaign happened. One way to think of the role of campaigns is that they push voters into thinking about politics and getting them to act in a way that's consistent with the fundamentals.
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If the economy is booming, the incumbent party’s campaign reminds people how they’re responsible for filling the country with sunshine and rainbows and happiness.
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One way to think of the role of campaigns is that they push voters into thinking about politics and getting them to act in a way that’s consistent with the fundamentals.

If the economy is shrinking, the out-party reminds people that things have never been worse in the history of the universe and the world will end if they aren’t elected.
Campaigns also matter when...

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Name recognition before the primaries

- Oh yeah, I know that person
  - Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump
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- I think I’ve heard of that guy
  - Jeb Bush
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- Who the heck is that?
  - Ted Cruz, Bernie Sanders, Marco Rubio, Chris Christie, Rand Paul
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- Who the heck is that?
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- No, seriously, who is that?
  - Lincoln Chafee, Bobby Jindal, Jim Gilmore
Name recognition is built through media attention
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Television Mentions By Candidate

Source: Internet Archive TV News Archive
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No such thing as negative press

How much negative media coverage does each presidential candidate generate?

TRUMP
CRUZ
KASICH
CLINTON
SANDERS

SOURCE: Crimson Hexagon

Data from Crimson Hexagon; graphic by Vox's Javier Zarracina
A new analysis from Crimson Hexagon shows Hillary Clinton getting the most negative coverage of the presidential candidates. The data is based on hundreds of thousands of online news stories published since January 1, 2015.