



# American political campaigns



**William L. Benoit**

OHIO UNIVERSITY, USA

**ABSTRACT:** This essay provides a perspective on political campaigns in the United States. First, the historical background is discussed. Then the style of political actors is addressed. Campaign practices and the role of the media in elections are described. Finally, political culture and professionalization are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** American, campaigns, messages, democracy



## **INTRODUCTION. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CAMPAIGNS IN USA: DEMOCRATIC TRADITION AND QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN THIS COUNTRY**

From its inception, the U.S. has been a democracy. However, even casual students of history know that originally voters in the U.S. had to be white men. The right to vote was extended to members of minority groups (the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment to the U.S. constitution, 1870) and women (the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, 1920).

Early in America's history, presidential candidates did not actively campaign for the presidency; that was considered undignified. And today we know that they were right! Newspapers, speeches by surrogates, and pamphlets or handbills were the principle means of communicating to voters in the early 1800s. Presidential candidates did give some speeches, but the first candidate to deliver a partisan speech supporting his own candidacy was William Henry Harrison in 1840 (Jamieson, 1996). Harrison had lost the previous election, 1836, without actively campaigning, but the second time he ran he changed his strategy, campaigned actively, and won the presidency.

In 1924, the political conventions were broadcast on radio for the first time and paid radio advertising followed. In 1948, Harry Truman gave the first paid campaign speech broadcast on television (Jamieson, 1996). The first presidential television spot was broadcast by Senator William Benton in 1950; both major party presidential candidates were represented by TV spots in 1952.

The U.S. has two major political parties, as many of you know. The Democratic Party, just to confuse us, was originally the Democratic-Republican Party, created in 1792; in 1840 it was renamed the Democratic Party. The Republican Party was





William L. Benoit

founded in 1854. No third party candidate has come close to winning the presidential election in decades; only a few members of the U.S. Congress are not Democrats or Republicans. Currently, all but two U.S. senators are Democrats or Republicans; all current members of the U.S. House of Representatives are either Democrats or Republicans. The last session with more than two Representatives who were from a third party was 1943–1945; that last session with more than 2 senators from a third party was 1939–1941.

The earliest political campaign debate on record was a series of 7 debates for a seat in the U.S. Senate involving Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in 1858. Douglas won the Illinois senate seat but two years later, without any debates, Lincoln defeated Douglas for the U.S. presidency. The earliest presidential primary debate, broadcast on radio, was held between Republicans Dewey and Stassen in 1948 (Stassen won the nomination but lost the general election to Truman). The first general election debate was held in 1960, between Nixon and Kennedy. No general election presidential debates were held in 1964–1972, but they resumed again in 1976 and we have had them every campaign since.

Another presidential candidate who learned a lesson from losing was Richard Nixon. He ran for the presidency in 1960 and pledged to visit every state in 1960. Fulfilling his rather silly promise meant he could not focus as much as he needed on states where his appearances might have tipped the balance in his favor. He narrowly lost to Senator John Kennedy that year but when Nixon ran again in 1968 he did not try to campaign in every state: The second time he won. This idea that a president does not **need** to campaign in every state has even more recently become a strategy of campaigning **only** in “battleground” states. These are states where each candidate has a reasonable chance of winning. The U.S. presidency is won by receiving a majority of votes in the electoral college: We learned about this when George W. Bush became president in 2000 by winning the Electoral College; Al Gore won the popular vote by about half a million votes. Every state except two has a “winner-take-all” rule in the Electoral College: The candidate who has the largest vote in a state wins ALL of that state’s electoral votes. So, a candidate who loses a state with 49% of the citizens’ votes gets no electoral votes, the same as a candidate who loses with only 10 or 20% of the votes. There is no incentive to campaign in states one is sure to lose. On the other hand, a candidate who wins a state with 51% of the popular vote gets the same electoral votes (all of them) as a candidate who wins with 90% of the vote. This means there is no reason to spend resources campaigning in a state a candidate is certain to win – or in a state one is sure to lose. Bill Clinton in 1996 was the first president who did not rely on national TV spot buys; he bought in battleground states where the polls were close and campaigning might make a difference. Every Democratic and Republican presidential candidate since then has focused on battleground states in the general election campaign.

Another important feature of American campaigns is the primary election campaign, which determines which candidate will represent each of the two major po-



litical parties. The first primary election occurred in 1912 in North Dakota. In 1920, the state of New Hampshire started its tradition of the “first in the nation” primary: The NH state constitution declares by law it must have the earliest primary in the U.S. Our campaign season has become much longer over time. In 1952, for example, the New Hampshire primary was held on March 11. This year, it was held January 8 – and the first presidential primary TV spots were broadcast in January 2007! We do not vote for the president until November 4, 2008.

The nominating rules have changed over time. Many states did not hold primaries elections and the votes that **were** held were not binding on delegates. Instead, primaries were an opportunity for candidates to prove to party leaders that they could get votes; then party leaders decided the nominee. In 1968, Vice President Hubert Humphrey won the Democratic Party nomination without campaigning in a single primary – and then he lost to Richard Nixon in the general election. Unhappy with this outcome, the Democrats changed the rules in 1972 and the Republicans followed suit shortly thereafter. Now primary votes are binding on the delegates and primaries or caucuses are held throughout the nation – although both parties have some delegates who can vote for the nominee of their choice without regard for how party members voted in the primary. I do not know how closely you followed the contest between Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democratic presidential nomination – or the role of Democratic “superdelegates.” I would not be surprised if the nominating rules were changed before the next election in 2012.

I would argue that the quality of democracy is relatively high in America. U.S. citizens who are at least 18 years old – and have not been convicted of a serious crime – can vote if they register. Nevertheless, there are some criticisms or limitations of democracy in the U.S. that deserve mention.

1. Many people do not vote. The percentage of those who are eligible to vote has declined in the last fifty years. Some say that lower turn-out should not be considered a bad thing: It means that people are satisfied with government; I have to admit I would rather see more people vote.

Some people blame negative campaigns for decreased turnout by voters – but as I will show later, the news media’s coverage of political campaigns is significantly more negative than the messages from candidates. Others blame political cynicism for the decreasing turn-out, and this cynicism is said by some to be a result of the media’s relentless devotion to strategic coverage, which is much more common than issue coverage (a fact I will mention again later).

2. The size of the American population means that most campaigns – for president, for the U.S. senate, the U.S. House of Representatives, governors of state governments, mayors of many cities, and other elected offices – must be conducted in the mass media. There is simply no other way to reach voters. Reliance on the mass media to reach voters means that political campaigns are very expensive. American campaigns are not financed by the government; the government does provide some funds, but candidates must raise a great deal of money to run for elected office. In



William L. Benoit

2008, the Democratic and Republican candidates for president raised 876 million dollars for the **primary** campaign alone, through April 2008. The need to raise such huge sums of money means that politicians may have to please the donors who give large amounts of money to their campaigns. Candidates definitely offer access to large donors that other citizens do not have, and candidates probably feel grateful even if political favors are not directly traded for campaign contributions. So, the high cost of mass media campaigns is troubling.

3. There are elements of U.S. presidential elections which are not democratic: a) As I noted earlier, the Electoral College, which actually picks the president after the citizens vote in the general election campaign, uses a “winner-take-all” rule in most states. Those who vote for the loser in each state might as well have stayed home; their votes do not “count” in the Electoral College. b) In the U.S. presidential primaries, the Republican Party in many states also uses a “winner-take-all” rule for allocating delegates to the Republican National Convention (delegates pick the party’s nominee for president). The winner receives all the delegates for that state, and those who voted for other Republican primary candidates might as well have stayed home. c) In the U.S. presidential primaries, both major political parties have delegates who can support any candidate, regardless of how members of their party voted in primaries. This year, we heard much more about the Democratic “super-delegates” but the Republican Party has “unpledged delegates” who can ignore how members of the party voted. Depending on the vote split in primaries, superdelegates could decide who is the nominee.

### **COMMUNICATIVE STYLE AND STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL ACTORS IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS**

With the help of many of my students, we have content analyzed numerous messages from political candidates (Benoit, 2007), including: presidential primary TV spots (from 1952) and general election TV spots (from 1952), presidential primary debates (1948) and general debates (1960), presidential primary (1948) and general (1952) direct mail brochures, presidential primary and general webpages from candidates (starting in 2000), presidential primary and general television talk show appearances (starting in 2000), presidential nomination acceptance addresses (1952), and news coverage of presidential campaigns (starting in 1952). This year we analyzed the candidates’ pages on Facebook and MySpace.

We have also content analyzed TV spots for state governors, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House of Representatives. We have studied campaign debates for governor, U.S. Senate, and for several mayors of cities. So, we have messages from many candidates, in different message forms, from many campaigns.

One variable we have studied is the function of campaign messages. Overall, these messages have more positive than negative statements. For example, presidential primary and general campaigns in the US are mostly positive:



TV spots: 65% positive,  
 debates: 62% positive,  
 direct mail brochures: 77% positive,  
 nomination acceptance addresses: 77% positive,  
 and in 2008, statements on Facebook and MySpace pages by candidates were 99% positive.

American non-presidential campaign messages are also mostly positive:

U.S. Senate debates: 56% positive,  
 U.S. governor debates: 68% positive,  
 U.S. mayor debates: 75% positive,  
 U.S. governor spots: 60% positive.

We also study the topics of political campaign messages, dividing statements into those about policy and those about the candidates' character. Presidential primary and general election campaigns messages from candidates in the United States are mostly about policy:

TV spots: 58% policy,  
 debates: 71% policy,  
 direct mail brochures: 70% policy,  
 nomination acceptance addresses: 55% policy.

In 2008, Facebook and MySpace were an exception: 72% character

American non-presidential campaign messages also discuss policy more than character:

U.S. Senate debates: 56% policy,  
 U.S. governor debates: 68% policy,  
 U.S. mayor debates: 70% policy,  
 U.S. governor spots: 66% policy.

These findings may be surprising to some. Many people have the impression that American presidential campaigns are mostly negative and mostly about character or image. Our data show these are false assumptions when messages from **candidates** are examined. However, our research on coverage of presidential campaigns in the *New York Times* may explain why people have these false impressions about American presidential campaign style. *New York Times*' coverage of American general presidential elections is 57% negative. The topics in news coverage are mostly horse race (41%), followed by character (32%) and only 25% policy.

Another aspect of campaign style is that messages from the candidates themselves are often more positive than messages from other groups. For example, in the U.S. we have TV spots sponsored by the candidates and ads sponsored by the political parties. Party ads are significantly more negative than candidate ads: In 2000, presidential ads sponsored by political parties were negative in 59% of statements. Similarly, ads can be sponsored by special interest groups in the U.S.: Those ads tend to be much more negative than ads sponsored by candidates. In 2004, non-candidate sponsored ads were negative in 80% of statements.



William L. Benoit

**PRACTICES OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS  
(PUBLIC SPEAKING, DEBATES, ADVERTISING, TELEVISION, ETC.)**

Candidates use many campaign message forms to reach voters. Use of multiple media is very important because no medium is used by all citizens. The two candidate media which are most probably the most important at the presidential level are TV spots and debates, because of the huge size of audiences. TV spots and debates are probably even more important for non-presidential candidates than presidential candidates, because the news spends little time on non-presidential candidates. Most campaigns have webpages (and, this year, presidential primary candidates had Facebook and MySpace pages), but they must attract voters and it seems likely that most visitors to candidate Internet pages already support that candidate. The voters candidates most want to persuade, undecided voters, probably are less likely to visit candidate webpages. News on television and in newspapers – and the Internet – are also important sources of information and presidential candidates continually seek news coverage. However, as we say, the news media focus most on horse race, some on character, and relatively little on policy.

**ROLE AND MEDIA PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS.  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA  
AND POLITICAL ACTORS/CANDIDATE/POLITICAL PARTY**

The candidates provide “photo-opportunities” to attract the attention of the news media. Candidates send out many press releases too. They hope to get “free media” in the form of news coverage. Clearly, political candidates want to influence both the topic and tone of coverage. However, as I indicated earlier, the news focuses on the horse race, with less emphasis on the candidates character or qualifications for office, and even less emphasis on the candidates’ policy positions. Furthermore, one strategy for the news media to show its “objectivity” is to criticize all candidates equally – and our research shows coverage is mostly negative. Candidates hope for favorable news coverage, but rely on debates and TV spots.

Some have suggested that the news media has become more critical over time, citing governmental deception over the war in Vietnam and deception from President Nixon over the Watergate scandal. However, our data on *New York Times* coverage of presidential campaigns do not show any significant increase in the percentage of critical remarks over time.

**POLITICAL CULTURE OF CITIZENS. ACTIVITY OF VOTERS**

American citizens vary widely in their interest in political campaigns. Some citizens have no interest in politics and campaigns – this is sad but true. Markus Prior in his book *Post-Broadcast Democracy* argues that proliferation of media – including cable TV and satellite television, the Internet, and DVDs – has made it much easier for



those with little or no interest in the campaign to avoid watching candidates or news about candidates. This makes TV spots, which are hard to avoid if one lives in a battleground state, more important than ever before.

On the other hand, the proliferation of media, particularly cable TV and the Internet, has made it much easier for those with high interest in politics and campaigns to learn as much as they want.

As noted earlier, voter turn-out has decreased significantly over time. However, some years have higher than normal interest and the current American presidential campaign has shown extremely high voter turn-out in the primaries, and especially in Democratic primaries. I anticipate that turn-out will be very high in the November 2008 presidential elections. I hope this will be the start of a trend toward more voter participation, but it may be temporary.

### **PROFESSIONALIZATION AND MODERNIZATION OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

Americans, for better or worse, have developed an industry or profession of political campaign consultants and advisors. They rely heavily on public opinion polls and focus group research to market candidates to voters. Political candidates for elective office around the world sometimes hire American political campaign consultants; they may, if they choose, emulate some American campaign practices.

We have recently started to study political campaign debates in non-U.S. countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, South Korea, Taiwan, the Ukraine. For the most part these debates resemble their American counterparts: mostly positive (although, as in America, candidates who are challenging an incumbent tend to be more negative), more about policy than character. Positive statements were most common in political leaders' debates in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, South Korea, and Taiwan; one of two candidates (the incumbent) used mostly positive statements in the Ukraine. Campaign debates in all eight countries discussed policy more than character. It is vital to keep differences between countries in mind. For example, in South Korean debates, unlike debates in other countries, incumbent party candidates do not acclaim more and attack less than challenger candidates. The explanation for this can be found in South Korean political culture: South Korean presidents are limited to one term in office and there is no Vice President in South Korea. So, no candidate can run for office having been at the top of the current administration.

### **REFERENCES**

- Benoit, W.L. (2007). *Communication in Political Campaigns*. New York: Peter Lang.  
 Jamieson, K.H. (1996). *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.