

The Winning Message

CANDIDATE BEHAVIOR, CAMPAIGN
DISCOURSE, AND DEMOCRACY

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Introduction

Observers of American elections regularly bemoan the lack of substance in contemporary political campaigns. However, while the need for substance has been clearly articulated, the remedy is not so apparent. Meanwhile, a sea change in the conduct of American politics continues to increase the public's dependence on campaigns for political information. The traditional competition between parties has evolved into a clash of candidates. This clash increasingly occurs over the airwaves and through other means of direct contact, largely at the expense of previous mechanisms that mediated contact between politicians and the public. For voters, the campaign is the proximate source of information about the candidates and the most immediate influence on their decision. For candidates, the campaign offers the best opportunity to hear the public's voice, to clarify long-term goals, and to establish immediate political priorities. Thus, the lack of substance alarms citizens and scholars alike and underscores the importance of an investigation of the dynamics supporting substantive campaigns. In what follows, I attempt to expose the roots of this problem and then to isolate the factors that either elevate or debase campaign discourse.

My examination is built around a minimal standard for normatively acceptable campaigns, called dialogue. Simply put, dialogue means that when one candidate raises a subject, his or her opponent responds by discussing the same subject. The opposite of dialogue is ignoring, responding by discussing a different subject. I rely on the work of leading political theorists and social critics to build a case for using dialogue as the criterion to evaluate contemporary campaigns, arguing that the standards for public discourse they propose entail a minimal requirement for dialogue. The concept of dialogue then bridges the

normative discussion of campaigns and actual practice. My research into the dynamics supporting dialogue follows a social scientific approach, using several methodologies – game theory, experimental designs, content analysis, and sample surveys. Each method offers a unique strength in terms of investigating the phenomenon of campaign discourse, and, in combination, they create a robust understanding of the process and consequence of campaign communication.

Many features recommend dialogue as a yardstick for evaluating the quality of a campaign. In general, it is difficult to define and measure campaign substance, so a study of this kind must first establish a reasonably acceptable standard for campaign discourse that is also empirically useful. Simple assessments as to whether a particular campaign message is substantive are likely to be unsatisfactory. In the first place, almost every act or utterance can be construed as having some substantive content. The literature offers examples ranging from erudite policy analysis to the mundane act of eating a tamale incorrectly (Popkin 1991). More importantly, a simple way of measuring substance would neither account for the campaign's interactive nature nor allow us to engage in overall comparisons across campaigns. With the approach I take, it is clear that a partially substantive campaign is not one in which some messages are judged substantive and others are judged "fluff." Rather, a partially substantive campaign is characterized by constructive engagement for an observable proportion of the campaign's duration.

In constructing this yardstick for campaigns, I rely heavily on the work of democratic and critical theorists. What does (or more properly should) our society want in a campaign? Paraphrasing Kelley (1960), Bennett (1992), and others, the preelection campaign should educate voters to enable them to make an informed decision, and thereby clearly communicate their preferences to elected officials. As has been argued by nearly all democratic theorists, the best means to this end is free and open public discussion. Simplifying these complex normative theories, I argue that John Stuart Mill's notion of the marketplace of ideas and Jurgen Habermas's ideal speech situation both presume a minimal normative requirement for public speech that can be applied to campaign discourse. The unspoken premise running through these essays is the necessity for dialogue. Because of its position as a necessary condition for rational discourse, the level of dialogue approximates the quality of the campaign, where more is better.

Dialogue requires the cooperation or at least the acquiescence of both candidates. To state the obvious, an individual candidate cannot

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dialogue. Dialogue occurs only when two candidates address the same subject. The decision to dialogue can be construed as a strategic choice, so this construct can be used to dissect the behavior of candidates who pursue rational strategies in the hope of winning elections. Faced with an opponent's initiative, a candidate can choose to ignore it and raise a different subject, or a candidate can choose to respond on that subject. A response creates dialogue and opens the door to debate – an absence of dialogue blocks the direct route to meaningful communication. Game theory provides a tool to model these interactions, which are responsible for creating campaign discourse.

My game-theoretic model, some of whose assumptions are verified with an experimental design, condenses a large portion of the relevant research on voting behavior and campaign communication in the service of explaining the conditions that lead to dialogue. Given the assumption that candidates behave rationally when constructing campaign messages, the model yields a deductive proscription against dialogue. This preliminary result is confirmed using experimental and survey data from the 1994 California gubernatorial race. In this election, a candidate self-consciously dedicated to dialogue ran against a candidate equally self-consciously dedicated to pursuing victory by other means. The defeat of the candidate who attempted to dialogue (Democrat Kathleen Brown) provides a cautionary tale for those who believe in the potential for dialogue in any strong form in contemporary campaigns.

Dialogue is readily observable in everyday politics, as evidenced by some common expressions that signify the absence of dialogue – changing the subject, or “ducking an issue,” for instance. Dialogue of some kind appears in almost every election, and these instances identify which levers to use to enhance political discourse. I refine my model and develop testable hypotheses to explain these appearances. First, some dialogue can be explained as the result of the media's editorial policies. Second, dialogue emerges from the “irrational” actions of certain candidates; for example, those who make mistakes or violate the model's assumptions. Third, some dialogue can be focused, intense, and substantive, when the campaign's psychological arena (public opinion) is effectively limited to one dimension, as in so-called critical elections (Burnham 1970). Using an exhaustive content analysis of almost fifty U.S. Senate elections, supported by background and survey data, I test for the appearance of dialogue under these circumstances.

This project, then, can be seen as an attempt to illustrate and investigate the tension between candidates' self-interest in winning and the

collective interest in furthering democratic ideals. To articulate the polity's collective interest in campaigns as information-supplying institutions I develop the metaphor of a campaign as a political conversation as opposed to a political game. The decisive feature of this metaphor is the importance of dialogue in public discourse. The formal model takes up the game metaphor, which dominates current thinking about campaigns, and explains the absence of dialogue. Refinements of the model also pinpoint some special circumstances that support dialogue and higher quality discourse. Two sets of empirical analysis support these arguments: The first focuses on the causes of the absence of dialogue and is based on experimental data; the second focuses on special circumstances promoting dialogue and is based on a correlational analysis. Thus, the concept of dialogue captures the normative claims made by leading thinkers, addresses the interactive nature of the campaign and is capable of serving as a focus of empirical examination.

OUTLINE OF SUBSEQUENT CHAPTERS

In chapter two, I provide a justification for using dialogue as a normative standard for campaign discourse. First, I recount the observations of political spectators over the past hundred years who have highlighted the tendency for candidates to "talk past each other." Starting with the claim that campaigns are worthy of critical examination, I move on to discuss how an ideal campaign discourse would appear, taking my cue from the existing literature on public discourse, especially Habermas's notion of an ideal speech situation. In so doing, I also try to point out the special features of campaigns. Further, in order to underscore the significance of this study, I rehearse arguments that link the quality of public discourse to the legitimacy of democratic governance. With the normative view clarified, I propose dialogue as a standard consistent with that vision. I conclude by contrasting the game and conversational metaphors for campaigns.

In chapter three, I trace the relevant empirical literature that bears on understanding the origins and nature of campaign discourse. I begin with the contributions of three schools of political science research, the Michigan approach to the study of voting, the Rochester approach to the analysis of the behavior of rational candidates, and the "low-information rationality" perspective on voting in mass elections. I then synthesize these literatures into a nascent theory of campaigns in mass

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elections. This theory identifies the forces that impel or dissuade candidates from adopting campaign communication strategies that produce dialogue. I then briefly discuss the social scientific methodologies that are employed in subsequent analyses and outline my research design.

In chapter four, I develop a formal model that highlights the pressures on candidates to avoid discussing minority-held views and, thus, to avoid dialogue. I assume candidates are rational and model their behavior around a representation of voting and a typology of potential campaign effects. I claim every voter sums a number of different considerations, weighted in proportion to their importance. The typology consists of three well-researched effects: priming, learning, and direct persuasion. Taken as a whole, this typology describes the net effect of campaign communication on vote choice. Within this framework, candidates choose to discuss the set of themes that they expect will maximize their share of the electoral vote. The fundamental result is that engaging in dialogue is a dominated strategy. The open debate regarded as a mainstay of democratic decision making will never occur if candidates behave as the model dictates.

My approach diverges from other formal models of elections in important respects. Voters are taken to behave sincerely, an assumption that formalizes the well-researched psychological process underlying vote choice. The model is multidimensional. Finally, consistent with empirical research, I assume candidates have exogenous positions that are fixed for the duration of the campaign. These modifications, taken together, lead to a better fit between the model and the actual practice of campaigns.

In chapter five, I verify the ineffectiveness of dialogue as a vote-getting strategy with a case study of the 1994 California gubernatorial election. I chose this race because it pitted an incumbent, Pete Wilson, known for his use of contemporary campaign techniques, against a challenger, Kathleen Brown, who explicitly adhered to a strategy of dialogue. An experimental design employing actual ads shown to adult voters was administered during the campaign, which shows that the strategy of ignoring an opponent's message generates a better return than engaging in dialogue. When subjects saw Kathleen Brown discussing crime and immigration, the very themes Wilson advanced, she lost ground; when she discussed the economy and education, she gained. Likewise, when subjects saw Wilson discussing Brown's themes,

he lost, but in conditions where he stayed “on message,” he won. I analyze the experimental dataset further insofar as it allows the assessment of some of the modeling assumptions. To provide better grounds from which to generalize these results, the success of Wilson’s strategy and the failure of Brown’s is confirmed using poll data taken from the California poll.

In chapter six, I take the study of dialogue from the laboratory into the real world of campaigns with a study of dialogue in U.S. Senate elections. One major paper in each of forty-nine states is sampled from the elections of 1988, 1990, and 1992. The text of all the articles mentioning either candidate in the race were downloaded and coded according to the scheme devised to capture the amount of discussion generated by each candidate on thirty-two dimensions. In all over 6,700 articles were coded – almost a half a million lines of text. Using this data, three continuous measures of dialogue were constructed – instant dialogue, which measures dialogue appearing within the same article, sustained dialogue, which taps the amount of discussion of minority-held views over the course of a campaign, and a composite indicator, which combines the previous two. As expected the study reveals that the amount of dialogue, by any measure, present in these campaigns was quite low. I then digress to analyze the effects of dialogue on various measures of voter information and vote quality. This analysis documents that the presence of dialogue leads to a more informed and “better” electorate.

In chapter seven, I outline the prerequisites for meaningful dialogue in terms of the candidates’ incentive structure and other background factors. Dialogue of a kind appears, albeit rarely, in almost every electoral campaign, casting doubts on my absolute proscription. By refining the model further, I attempt to explain the presence of these few instances of dialogue and to isolate those factors responsible for its appearance. The editorial policy of a paper or the political culture of a given region can drive the appearance of dialogue. Mistakes or violations of assumptions also play a clear role in the appearance of dialogue. For example, some candidates have no realistic chance of winning, so a rational model cannot explain their campaign behavior. This kind of dialogue is outside the model’s purview. On the other hand, special cases produce explainable and meaningful dialogue. When the campaigners are effectively limited to discussing one issue or a cluster of closely correlated issues, as in so-called critical elections, a dialogue will occur.

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In chapter eight, I summarize and draw conclusions. I discuss a weaker kind of dialogue called reframing. This distinction is subtle and involves cases where a psuedodialogue does not threaten a candidate's electoral prospects. I discuss some of the attempts to reframe dimensions in recent presidential contests, identifying them as fruitful areas for future research. I then review the lessons of this project, including an essay as to what campaign reform can and cannot accomplish.