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Campaign Reformers: Optimists, Skeptics, and Rejectionists

At a time when much of the world is turning to democracy, it is ironic that many Americans are dissatisfied with the quality of their own political contests. Politicians are accused of adopting uncivil styles of discourse. Consultants are charged with engaging in manipulative and/or deceptive behavior. Observers say candidates avoid detailed substance in their campaign appeals. Voters complain that political campaigns have become overly negative and are not very informative.¹

Given the dissatisfaction that exists regarding American campaigns, a broad range of academic writers and nongovernmental organizations has pushed for improvements in how races are conducted. Reform groups such as Common Cause, the Alliance for Better Campaigns, the Center for Voting and Democracy, the Institute for Global Ethics, and the Project for Excellence in Journalism have developed ideas for more debates and issue forums, providing training schools for consultants and journalists and strengthening ethical standards that they believe will improve the process. The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Markle Foundation, the Open Society Institute, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Smith Richardson Foundation, and others have committed millions of dollars to investigating whether voluntary codes of conduct signed by candidates, self-regulation by consulting trade associations, the development of formal accreditation and certification programs for campaign consultants, and other reforms will strengthen democratic institutions.²

Despite the importance of these efforts, scholars have not engaged in a systematic evaluation of the propositions underlying these campaign reforms. Little research has examined the extent to which proposed reforms have been adopted or the reactions of the American public and campaign professionals to those that have been implemented. Where

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proposals have been adopted, there has been virtually no analysis to determine whether reforms are linked to intended improvements in candidate conduct and civil discourse.

In this book, we evaluate the work of those who have sought to improve the electoral process. We review alternative reform approaches based on the views of “optimists,” “skeptics,” and “rejectionists,” categorizations that reflect differences in opinion regarding the nature of electoral problems and likely efficacy of proposed reforms. We do not seek to debunk the work of reformers but instead to apply rigorous theoretical and empirical analysis to their efforts. We believe that political science has important lessons to teach reformers. If their goal is to improve the system, we need a serious assessment to determine what changes can be implemented, given the institutional constraints that exist and the political incentives facing particular participants. What works and why does it succeed? What fails and why is it unsuccessful?

Using data from an in-depth content analysis of campaign communications, interviews with campaign professionals, a survey of campaign consultants active in competitive races, focus groups with campaigners, and a national public opinion survey, we investigate how campaign conduct is affected by reform efforts. We argue that while individual reform efforts have achieved some of their stated objectives, the overall effect of these reform efforts has been disappointing. To look at specific reforms that have been attempted, we find that voters appreciate debates and issue forums and pay attention to them during campaigns. But few candidates – particularly few in competitive races – have signed voluntary codes of conduct; consultants give little indication that they can regulate themselves or refrain from discourse that pushes the envelope in competitive contests. As we discuss in our concluding chapter, a different approach to improving campaign conduct and political discourse in American elections is clearly called for if improved campaigning is the goal.

DIFFERING VIEWS OF ELECTION PROBLEMS
AND THE VIABILITY OF CAMPAIGN REFORM

Political observers are divided in their views about the seriousness of electoral problems in the United States and the viability of proposed campaign reforms. In reviewing discussions about American elections, we find there are three general categories of electoral perspectives: rejectionist, optimist, and skeptical.

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“Rejectionists” argue that elections are determined by government performance and that campaigns matter little in determining electoral outcomes. Following the classic tradition of V. O. Key, these scholars emphasize a reward/punishment model based on actual government indicators, such as the economy or war and peace.³ If the economy (or a war) is going well and the public is satisfied with the overall performance of the current administration, they should vote for members of that administration’s party; and if they are dissatisfied, they should punish the in-party by voting against its officials. As a consequence, these academics reject campaign reforms as unnecessary for the effective functioning of government.

This model of democracy requires only minimal information and choice on the part of the electorate. Voters are not required to follow policy debates very carefully or to research the details of a candidate’s political platform. Rather, they simply must be able to judge whether the job is being performed by the current administration. Evaluating whether their personal standard of living is rising or declining, whether they have jobs, and whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the general course of affairs enables voters to compare competing candidates and hold political leaders accountable.⁴

Taken in this light, performance-based analysts tend to think that the quality of the campaign, the nature of candidate discourse, and the coverage by the mass media do not matter much in determining election results. Highly salient concerns (such as the unemployment rate, inflation, the number of troop fatalities, and the cost of gas prices) are what move voters.⁵

In contrast, “optimists” feel the campaign matters. With the weakening of party identifications and the tendency of voters to focus on short-term electoral factors, the quality of campaign discourse, the nature of candidate rhetoric, and the extent to which news coverage informs the public are critical at election time. It is not that government performance is irrelevant, but that high-quality campaign discourse and political communications are required to help voters hold officials accountable.⁶ Democratic elections require healthy discourse, civil tones, and sufficient substance to enable voters to represent their interests. Deceitful or misleading candidate statements short-circuit democratic processes and weaken the accountability of the electoral process.⁷

According to this perspective, voters must be in a position to evaluate the degree to which incumbents are responsible for good or poor performance. Assessing blame is an inexact science and is an exercise

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in which many citizens need help. If they are interested in rewarding or punishing officials, citizens must pay some attention to political rhetoric and possess enough information to hold politicians accountable for general conditions. Citizens need effective campaigns and viable opposition leaders, not just platitudinous campaign rhetoric, in order to make these judgments effectively.

Unlike the rejectionists, optimists place great importance on the quality of the candidates and of their campaigns.⁸ Voters not only have to decide among competing candidates, as is true with the first model, but they also have to be aware of policy alternatives, be able to judge the respective policy merits promulgated by different candidates, and hold leaders accountable for policy commitments. For such a system to work effectively, citizens must be very engaged in politics, have enough information to make up their minds on crucial matters, and ask tough questions of political leaders. This statement of democratic theory requires broader and more refined voter knowledge and political campaigns that convey substantive information to the public.

Given the importance of discourse and communications in democratic elections, optimists believe that the electoral process must be reformed to address key information deficiencies. Foremost among their list of complaints are the ideas that political campaigns have become non-substantive, deceptive, unfair, and overly negative in the information conveyed to the general public. According to a national opinion study, 39 percent of voters believe that all or most candidates deliberately lie to voters.⁹

In the eyes of some people, paid political consultants deserve blame for the poor quality of American campaigns. A national survey by the Pew Research Center found that 31 percent of Americans gave campaign consultants a grade of A or B, 29 percent gave them a C, and 13 percent rated their performance a D or F for the way they conducted themselves during the 2000 presidential election.¹⁰ While there clearly is a division of opinion among the general public, 42 percent of Americans, a majority of those who had an opinion on this question, saw consultants performing at a C, D, or F level.

The public is unhappy with how reporters cover campaigns.¹¹ A majority of citizens (56 percent) argued that news stories often are inaccurate. This erosion of confidence in news-gathering has undermined public support for the press in general. During the course of the last two decades, the media's favorability ratings have dropped substantially.

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Table 1-1. American Association of Political Consultants'
Code of Campaign Conduct

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- I will not indulge in any activity which would corrupt or degrade the practice of political consulting.
 - I will treat my colleagues and clients with respect and never intentionally injure their professional or personal reputations.
 - I will respect the confidence of my clients and not reveal confidential or privileged information obtained during our professional relationship.
 - I will use no appeal to voters which is based on racism, sexism, religious intolerance, or any form of unlawful discrimination and will condemn those who use such practices. In turn, I will work for equal voting rights and privileges for all citizens.
 - I will refrain from false or misleading attacks on an opponent or member of his or her family and will do everything in my power to prevent others from using such tactics.
 - I will document accurately and fully any criticism of an opponent or his or her record.
 - I will be honest in my relationship with the news media and candidly answer questions when I have the authority to do so.
 - I will use any funds I receive from my clients, or on behalf of my clients, only for those purposes invoiced in writing.
 - I will not support any individual or organization which resorts to practices forbidden by this code.
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Source: American Association of Political Consultants.

More and more citizens complain that reporters are biased, sensationalist, unfair, and inaccurate.¹²

The widespread and persistent nature of these complaints about the electoral process leads optimists to want to reform contemporary campaigns. With the extensive dissatisfaction that exists regarding American campaigns and elections, nongovernmental organizations and foundations concerned with good government have pushed for improvements in how American races are conducted.¹³ As mentioned earlier, the specific reforms proposed cover a wide spectrum. To increase the substantive campaign content, some have suggested that candidates participate in more formal debates, forums, and town meetings; others have proposed that candidates be given free media time uninterrupted by press questioning.

Still other reformers have called for voluntary self-restraint on the part of candidates and consultants (see Table 1-1 for the American Association of Political Consultants' Code of Conduct). Campaign professionals have been urged to sign voluntary pledges in which they agree not to engage in campaigning that is unfair, deceptive, misleading, or overly negative.¹⁴

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Others have recommended ethics codes for consultants that would penalize violators of agreed-upon professional standards; another group has designed training programs that teach candidates about campaign conduct. Finally, some have called for training programs run by universities or professional associations that would raise the level of ethics and professionalism within the consulting industry. As examples, the George Washington University has a school of campaign management, the University of California at Berkeley has a Center for Campaign Leadership, the University of Virginia has the Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership, and the University of Akron has the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics. All of these programs offer training and/or degree programs to improve campaign performance.

Election “skeptics” tend to agree that there are problems with contemporary campaigns; like the optimists but unlike the rejectionists, they believe that the campaigns matter. However, unlike the optimists, skeptics believe that many of the complaints about contemporary campaigns are endemic to the political process and are not likely to be fixed through reform initiatives.¹⁵ For these individuals, criticisms about attacks, fairness, and superficial rhetoric represent the partisan, personal, and cyclical nature of politics. Depending on the nature of the political times, some elections are more substantive, while others are more superficial. Some feature more attacks, while others do not. These variations are merely part of the give and take of politics, not a cause for great alarm.¹⁶

If observers do not like the lack of specificity in candidate discussions or the tone of the rhetoric, it is a person’s job in a democracy to criticize candidates on those bases. High-minded appeals to candidate self-restraint or enlightened political self-interest are not likely to be successful.¹⁷ Politics is a participant activity, and reformers should not be “goody two shoes” who remain on the sidelines. They should engage with other partisans, fight fire with fire, and do all they can to defeat those who run campaigns with tactics they find repugnant.¹⁸

Skeptics believe that optimists do not understand office-seekers’ political incentives. Some candidates will use whatever tactics are available to win elections – mean-spirited attacks, superficial rhetoric, or deceptive appeals – if the candidates and their advisors feel that those tactics will be successful in gaining more votes. According to the skeptics’ viewpoint, the job of the candidates is to win votes by whatever legal means are at their disposal, not to stick to the issues nor to stay on the high road. Politics is a rough and tumble business, and optimists should not subject elections to unrealistic high-minded standards.

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Samuel Popkin, a performance-based voting expert who is critical of reform optimists, states that there are valid grounds for questioning the hopefulness of electoral reformers. Political campaigns “are commonly criticized as tawdry and pointless affairs, full of dirty politics, dirty tricks, and mudslinging, which ought to be cleaned up, if not eliminated from the system. . . . Most suggestions for reforming the campaigns have no basis in any sustained argument about how proposed reforms would affect voters or improve the system.”¹⁹

THE LOCUS OF OUR STUDY

Our goal in this project is not to evaluate every aspect of the reform agenda. Scholars have made proposals for change in a variety of different areas. Looking at presidential elections, some feel the Electoral College no longer serves the national interest.²⁰ Others want to strengthen political parties or rein in the high cost of contemporary campaigns.²¹ Still others focus on the news media and the job they do in covering American races and how this affects citizen participation.²² In light of irregularities in recent elections, another group focuses on ballot design and how particular features affect voting.²³

Our goal is to establish criteria and then to evaluate an important set of reforms, not to propose new ideas. We seek to evaluate campaign discourse and conduct in House and Senate campaigns in order to ascertain whether particular reforms are associated with real or perceived improvements in elections.²⁴ We do not accept the rejectionists’ view that campaigns do not matter. Even if government performance is the major determinant of voting behavior, the quality of the campaign and the nature of the political communications make a difference. Unless voters have help in judging candidates, it is difficult for them to represent their self-interest and hold government officials accountable. But we do not accept the optimists’ view either. Reform for reform sake should not be the goal. We believe that reformers must have specific goals in mind and that reform efforts should be evaluated against those goals. However, we do not fall into the skeptics’ camp either. We want to evaluate specific reforms and determine why they do or do not work before we are ready to conclude that effective reform is or is not possible.

In the debate between optimists and skeptics, we are not sure who is right in their interpretation of reform efficacy. Both perspectives agree that the campaign matters, but one side thinks reform will be effective, while the other side tends to believe politics will trump reform at the

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end of the day. Ultimately, we believe that whether those ideas that have been implemented in congressional races have produced the benefits envisioned by optimists is an empirical question. We further believe that understanding why they have or have not been effective is critical to evaluating the possibility of fundamental change.

To that end, in this study, we focus on campaign discourse and conduct because they have been central to reform organization activities and are key to democratic representation and accountability. It is an empirical matter whether districts where candidates have taken a pledge to avoid negative campaigning have produced campaigns that are more civil and more informative than places where such pledges have not been made. In the same vein, we focus on campaign conduct because the behavior of campaign participants, such as candidates and consultants, is vital to how citizens view the political process. Do districts where campaigners have engaged in practices defined by reform advocates as misleading or unethical exhibit campaign conduct that is different from that found elsewhere? Our task in the remainder of this volume is to see to what extent these efforts have been successful in improving American elections.

Our locus of study of electoral reform is campaign discourse and conduct in the context of the 2002 House and Senate elections. We emphasize House and Senate campaigns because they have been central to public concerns about elections. Legislative races have engendered many complaints about one-sided races, nasty rhetoric, weak media coverage, and unethical tactics. As such, they constitute a meaningful vehicle for evaluating campaign reform efforts.

Midterm elections also offer the advantage of a pure look at congressional races without the distraction of a presidential campaign. Presidential campaign races attract much more media and scholarly attention than do congressional races, which make the latter an important object of scholarly study. Since House and Senate midterm elections are crucial to policymaking and are not contaminated with presidential election effects, they represent a valuable opportunity to study the impact of campaign reform on discourse and conduct.

The 2002 election was noteworthy because it featured an agenda that was balanced between foreign policy and traditional domestic concerns such as the economy, health care, taxes, and education. This campaign was also the first national election following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC. As such, it allows us to see how a dramatic external attack affected styles of campaigning in midterm elections.

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In focusing on campaign discourse and conduct, we are not denigrating efforts to improve political parties, campaign finance, ballot structures, redistricting, or other kinds of political reform.²⁵ Each of these foci is vitally important to the health of American democracy. One cannot have democratic elections without strong parties, fair campaign finance rules, districts that are drawn in a manner to foster possible competition, and ballots that are understandable to ordinary citizens.

Yet we argue that there also needs to be attention to the concerted efforts that have been made to improve the quality of campaign discourse and conduct in the United States. These are areas that have been the object of sustained time, energy, and money on the part of foundations, interest groups, universities, and nonprofit organizations. As students of the political process, we need to determine to what extent these activities have been effective.

INDICATORS OF REFORM SUCCESS OR FAILURE

To determine whether reform has been successful in regard to campaign discourse and conduct, we developed a variety of methodologies and indicators of how electoral reform affects the quality of campaigns. One of the things we discovered in undertaking this study is that there are no widely accepted models of effective discourse and quality conduct. Some researchers focus more on the problem of poor-quality information provided by media reporters, while others emphasize issues posed by candidate deception and manipulation. Still others point out the power of special interest groups in skewing campaign discourse, while other scholars complain that voters are not engaged in the political process and are not very informed about their campaign choices. Certainly many are concerned with the lack of civility in the ways in which candidates communicate with and about one another.

In addition, there is disagreement over how deleterious particular discourse problems are.²⁶ For example, some writers complain that “negative” advertising depresses voter interest and engagement while many others have disputed those results. Some see reporters playing legitimate roles in policing ads and serving as referees for campaign discourse, while others believe journalists are ill-equipped to engage in that type of oversight.

In this study, we look at discourse and conduct in House and Senate races. Using more than two dozen academic experts (acknowledged in the Preface), we undertook a detailed quantitative content analysis of ads,

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news, debates, mailings, and candidate Web sites in the races we deemed most competitive some months before the election, when this research commenced. Among other things, our local academic experts in each area coded communications for issue content, bias, tone, cognitive versus emotional appeal, character information, specificity, and the object of negativity.

Our assessment of candidate discourse followed from several qualities of effective elections that are widely accepted by reform advocacy organizations and “optimistic” academic reformers. Leaders in reform organizations believe that electoral discourse should be substantive, not overly negative, unbiased, and not misleading or deceptive. Therefore, our independent experts studied campaign communications to see what the degree of issue content, bias, and tone was and whether there were any differences between districts (or states) where reforms were adopted versus places where they were not. Presumably, if a congressional district had debates, issue forums, or pledges to avoid negativity, there should be improved discourse and conduct if reform prescriptions are to be considered effective.

The rationale reformers have for wanting substantive communications is that if voters have a choice, they must understand that choice. That is, the substance of campaign discourse must make clear to the voters what distinguishes one candidate from another based on experience, past record, proven ability, positions on the issues, the ability to accomplish goals, or a number of other relevant factors. Candidates need to convey this information to voters in a way that gets through to them and is not too shrill or negative because those types of tactics turn off many voters and may discourage them from participating in the electoral process. Discourse that is biased, misleading, deceptive, or unfair is thought to complicate the voter’s task of holding leaders accountable and representing citizen interests in the political process.²⁷

These requirements have led many reform organizations to focus on candidate discourse and patterns of media coverage as key measures of campaign quality. From their standpoint, a “good” campaign involves substantive campaigns that present options to voters in a way that allows them to vote for candidates with whom they agree on fundamental matters (i.e., issues, traits, values, or backgrounds). Citizens should have the opportunity to know where candidates stand on the issues, what qualifications they would bring to the office, how they would represent the district – each of these in concrete terms, not in meaningless platitudes.