Inquire: The Purpose of Campaigns

Overview
A major issue in any democracy is how the people express their will to those in charge. In a pure democracy, like in Ancient Athens, the people are the government, meeting and voting on every issue. But, in a republic, a representative democracy, the communications tend to be less immediate.

This is why the linkage institutions and linkage activities that allow people to express their will in the public policy cycle are so important. The political parties, special interest groups, media, and elections are all part of this cycle.

In this lesson we will discuss the roles of campaigns in the American political system and election process and understand how these two activities act as linkage activities for the American people.
Big Question: How do elections act as a linkage institution, allowing the people to express their desires to the government?

Watch: “Throw the Bums Out!”

Throw the bums out!

This has been the sentiment of American politics since... well, George Washington. Washington was elected unanimously — twice — and was incredibly respected even by those who did not agree with him. Since then, the history of U.S. politics is a history of competition and even acrimony, as the people on the outside try to replace the people on the inside every two to four years.

Collectively on all levels of government, Americans fill more than 500,000 public offices. Elections form the foundation of the modern democracy, and more elections are scheduled every year in the United States than in any other country in the world. Campaigns — where candidates launch efforts to convince voters to support them — precede most elections. In recent years, campaigns have become longer and more expensive, sparking a demand for campaign finance reform.

In the 2016 Presidential Election, Hillary Clinton raised over one billion dollars, spent nearly one billion dollars on her campaign, and still lost the election. Donald Trump raised and spent almost $700 million and won. However, media estimates are that Trump received approximately five billion dollars in free media time due to his outlandish style and controversial statements that received wide media coverage.*

The ever-increasing cost of campaigns makes fundraising more important than positions. The average sound bite from the candidates has shrunk from 43 seconds in 1968 to less than eight seconds by 2011. As a result, the public knows less and less about the candidate’s positions and more and more about his or her personal life, as the media seeks to sell ads.**

In order for the people to truly express their opinions, they have to know what they are voting for. But, in today’s campaign, there is always more sizzle than steak.

However, before the gloom and doom is preached too heavily, realistically, this is not new in America. Slogans, like Trump’s Make America Great Again, which have little meaning but make great statements have been around for almost the entirety of American history. Some of the more memorable slogans include William Henry Harrison’s Tippecanoe and Tyler too!, James K. Polk’s 54.40 or Fight!, and Warren G. Harding’s A Return to Normalcy... whatever that meant.

So, before we get too carried away about the lack of depth in our campaigns, let’s remember, depth has not always been our biggest concern. Many times, we just like the words.

*Allison, Bill; Rojanasakul, Mira; Harris, Brittany; and Sam, Cedric; Tracking the 2016 Presidential Money Race (December 9, 2016); Bloomberg; https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/graphics/2016-presidential-campaign-fundraising/; Date Accessed: Sunday, May 20, 2018

**Aronchick, David; Presidential Debates and the Power of Soundbites (2017); Huffington POst - THE BLOG 10/04/2012 06:20 pm ET Updated Dec 06, 2017;
Nomination Stage

Although the Constitution explains how candidates are elected for national office, it is silent on how those candidates should be nominated. Political parties have taken on the role of promoting nominees for offices, such as the presidency and seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Because there are no national guidelines, the nomination process varies. States pass election laws and regulations, choose the selection method for party nominees, and schedule the election. But, the process also greatly depends on the candidates and the political parties.

The most common method of picking a party nominee for state, local, and presidential contests is the primary. Party members use a ballot to indicate which candidate they desire for the party nominee. Despite the ease of voting using a ballot, primary elections have a number of rules and variations that can still confuse citizens. In a closed primary, only political party members may vote to select nominees. A registered Green Party member, for example, is not allowed to vote in a Republican or Democratic primary. Parties prefer this method because it ensures the nominee is picked by voters who legitimately support the party. An open primary allows all voters to vote. In this system, a Green Party member is allowed to pick either a Democratic or Republican ballot when voting.

For state-level office nominations, or the nomination of a U.S. senator or House member, some states use the top-two primary method. A top-two primary, sometimes called a jungle primary, pits all candidates against each other, regardless of party affiliation. The two candidates with the most votes become the final candidates for the general election. Thus, two candidates from the same party could run against each other in the general election.

Despite the common use of the primary system, at least five states (Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Colorado, and Iowa) regularly use caucuses for presidential, state, and local-level nominations. A caucus is a meeting of party members in which nominees are selected informally. Caucuses are less expensive than primaries because they rely on voting methods such as dropping marbles in a jar, placing names in a hat, standing under a sign bearing the candidate’s name, or taking a voice vote. Volunteers record the votes and no poll workers need to be trained or compensated. The party members at the caucus also help select delegates, who represent their choice at the party’s state or national level nominating convention. The Iowa Democratic Caucus is the most well known, as it is always the first primary in the presidential election.

Regardless of whether a primary or a caucus is used, this choice becomes, to a large extent, a choice of the people. This is a major way the people connect to the policy making cycle — by choosing candidates they believe will support the public policies they believe in.

Convention Season

Once it is clear who the parties’ nominees will be, presidential campaigns enter a quiet period. Candidates run fewer ads and concentrate on raising funds for the fall. This is a crucial time because lack of money can harm their chances. The media spends much of the summer keeping track of the fundraising totals while the political parties plan their conventions.

National parties host national conventions during presidential election years. The conventions are typically held between June and September, and conventions normally last four to five days, with days
devoted to platform discussion and planning, and nights reserved for speeches. The national media covers the Democratic and Republican conventions during presidential election years, mainly showing the speeches. Members of the candidate’s family and important party members generally speak during the first few days of a national convention, with the vice presidential nominee speaking on the next-to-last night and the presidential candidate on the final night. The two chosen candidates then hit the campaign trail for the general election.

Despite the lack of surprises, there are several reasons to host traditional conventions. First, the parties require that the delegates officially cast their ballots. Delegates from each state come to the national party convention to publicly state who their state’s voters selected as the nominee. Second, delegates will bring state-level concerns and issues to the national convention for discussion, while local-level delegates bring concerns and issues to state-level conventions. This list of issues that concern local party members will be discussed and voted upon by the delegates and party leadership at the convention. Just as wood planks make a platform, issues important to the party and party delegates make up the party platform. Third, conventions are covered by most news networks and cable programs. This helps the party nominee get positive attention while surrounded by loyal delegates, family members, friends, and colleagues.

General Elections and Election Day

The general election campaign period occurs between mid-August and early November. These elections are simpler than primaries and conventions, because there are only two major party candidates and a few minor party candidates. About 50 percent of voters will make their decisions based on party membership, so the candidates will focus on winning over independent voters and visiting states where the election is close.

Debates are an important element of the general election season. Debates allow voters to see candidates answer questions on policy and prior decisions. They also let voters see how candidates hold up under stress. Because television and the Internet make it possible to stream footage to a wide audience, modern campaign managers understand the importance of a debate.

Debates are generally over by the end of October, just in time for Election Day. In 1845, Congress passed legislation that moved the presidential Election Day to the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, and in 1872, elections for the House of Representatives were also moved to that same Tuesday. The United States was then an agricultural country, and because a number of states restricted voting to property-owning males over 21, farmers made up nearly 74 percent of voters.

Holding Election Day in November allowed time for the lucrative fall harvest to be brought in and the farming season to end. And, while not all members of government were of the same religion, many wanted to ensure that voters were not kept from the polls by a weekend religious observance. Finally, business and mercantile concerns often closed their books on the first of the month. Rather than let accounting get in the way of voting, the Bill’s language forces Election Day to fall between the second and eighth of the month.

None of these restrictions are considered as important now, and certainly an argument can be made for moving elections to the weekend to allow for more participation. However, each of these issues shows the importance that elections have always held as the “linkage activity” allowing the American people to insert themselves into the public policy making cycle.
Reflect

Poll: Would You Rather…

Your state will either hold primaries or caucuses as discussed in the Read and Expand sections above. Regardless of which one your state holds, which would you rather use to choose the candidate? A public forum where everyone talks and then votes or a private ballot on one day?

- Primary (private ballot)
- Caucus (public forum)

Expand: Campaigns - The Ultimate Beauty Contest or an Honest Effort to Choose?

How to Win an Election for Dummies

Campaign managers know that to win an election, they must do two things: reach voters with their candidate’s information and get voters to show up at the polls. To accomplish these goals, candidates and their campaigns will often try to target those most likely to vote. Unfortunately, these voters change from election to election, and sometimes from year to year. Additionally, those who will only vote in a presidential election are different from those who vote in a primary or a caucus. Some years see an increase in younger voters and others do not. Elections are unpredictable, and campaigns must adapt.

Presidential Campaigns

Campaigns can be very simple or very complex. For instance, running for the local school board is relatively simple. Candidates may just be required to file their names, answer a few questions from the local newspaper, and sit back and wait for the election. Running for president is different altogether. Today, it is almost impossible to mount a campaign for the presidency in less than two years. And how much money does it take? It certainly involves millions of dollars.

Even making the decision to run can be an expensive process. Potential candidates typically launch "exploratory committees" that involve extensive polling and fund-raising activities. Once potential candidates announce their candidacy, they must campaign for the primaries. Because primaries are conducted by states over several months in the spring before the election, candidates must crisscross the country, spending lots of time and money in the process.

Although candidates have the same goal for primary and general elections — to win — these elections are very different from each other and require a different set of strategies. Primary elections are more difficult for the voter. There are more candidates vying to become their party’s nominee, and party identification is not a useful cue because each party has many candidates rather than just one. Due to time limitations, voters may not research all the candidates. Nor will all the candidates get enough media or debate time to reach the voters. These issues make campaigning in a primary election difficult, so campaign managers tailor their strategies.
Primaries from the Campaign Perspective

By tradition, the first primaries (both Republican and Democratic) are held in New Hampshire in February, and the winners usually get a great deal of attention. As they mount their next campaigns, the winners often get more contributions than the losers, and so a phenomenon known as front-loading is created. The candidates who won the first few primaries almost always tend to win the later ones.

Two things are important in the early primaries: first, name recognition. Voters are unlikely to cast a vote for an unknown. Hillary Clinton enjoyed notoriety from having been First Lady, a U.S. senator from New York, and Secretary of State. Donald Trump had name recognition from being an iconic real estate tycoon with Trump buildings all over the world and being a reality TV star through shows like *The Apprentice*.

Second, visibility is crucial when a candidate is one in a long parade of faces. Given that voters will want to find quick, useful information about each, candidates will try to get the media’s attention and pick up momentum. The media are generally considered more reliable and unbiased than a candidate’s campaign materials, so voters turn to news networks and journalists to pick up information about the candidates’ histories and issue positions.

Conventions and the General Election from the Campaign Perspective

Party activists gather at the party conventions held in the summer to nominate their candidates formally; however, the primaries make the decision. The candidates also announce their vice-presidential running mates at the summer conventions.

After the conventions, the race for the general election begins. Since most American voters identify themselves as moderates, candidates often shift their messages to “capture the middle.” Presidential and vice-presidential debates, usually held in October, have become an important part of recent campaigns.

The expense and length of modern American elections and campaigns has become one of the biggest issues in politics today. Some recommend that political party spending be more closely monitored and others believe that overall spending caps must be set. Still, others advocate national, not state, control of the primary process in order to reduce the length and expense of campaigns. Whatever the criticisms, American elections and campaigns represent a dynamic and vital link between citizens and the government.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Political Campaigns: Crash Course Government and Politics #39
- A Crash Course video covering political campaigns in the U.S.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2A5QlpAyKSQ

Election Basics: Crash Course Government and Politics #36
- A Crash Course video covering the election process in the U.S.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48EZKXweGDo&t=412s

Electing a US President in Plain English
- A short and simple video explaining the process behind electing a U.S. president
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok_VQ8t7g6I
Lesson Glossary

closed primary: an election in which only voters registered with a party may vote for that party’s candidates

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open primary: an election in which any registered voter may vote in any party’s primary or caucus

top-two primary: (or jungle primary); a primary election in which the two candidates with the most votes, regardless of party, become the nominees for the general election

caucus: a form of candidate nomination that occurs in a town-hall style format rather than a day-long election; usually reserved for presidential elections

delegates: party members who are chosen to represent a particular candidate at the party’s state or National level nominating convention

party platform: the set of issues important to a political party and its party delegates

policy making cycle: stages in which the needs, concerns, and wants of the people become issues for the government to act on and affect change

linkage institutions: the groups, associations, and media that can begin to move an idea from the people to the government, linking the people to the public policy making process

Check Your Knowledge

1. ________________, also known as a jungle primary, pits all candidates against each other, regardless of party affiliation.
   A. Caucus
   B. Closed primary
   C. Open primary
   D. Top-two primary

2. True or False: One of the most crucial times for party nominees is after they have been selected because they need to raise funds
   A. True
   B. False

3. True or False: Primary elections are extremely difficult for the voters and the candidates because there is limited time for candidates to get media attention and debate, while voters do not have enough time to research and find the best candidate.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
1. D  2. A  3. A

Citations

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