

The Study of Political Campaigns

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DO POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS MATTER? This question, like so many in political science, seems natural, important, and straightforward. Yet the answer founders on the difficulty of defining both the subject and the predicate. What do we mean by political campaigns? How might they matter? This essay attempts to organize the study of campaigns by marking its boundaries and by ordering questions and designs in relation to each other. In our view, the following questions must be addressed:

Defining a Campaign—What is a campaign, and thus when is an effect a campaign effect?

Defining Campaign Effects—How do campaigns affect the factors relevant to vote choice and vote choice itself?

Studying Campaign Effects—What designs have been employed, and what are their relative merits for campaign effects?

Campaigns and Democratic Theory—What is the place of the campaign in democratic theory and practice? Is the campaign a place for deliberation, manipulation, or both?

Defining a Campaign

The answer to the question "What is a campaign?" is not simple. To start, there are two conceptually distinct, but empirically linked, ways of looking at a campaign. One focuses on institutional or quasi-institutional conditions. The second considers campaigns as periods of uncommon intensity

in the political order, which can either broaden the period identified as a campaign or narrow it.

We begin by delineating the institutional conditions. Usually, if the following are true, a campaign is under way:

The date of the election is known.

The identity of the candidates is known.

Candidates are available to spend virtually all of their time getting (re)elected.

Certain actions that are normally unregulated are now regulated and, in some cases, forbidden—for example, fund-raising and spending.

The first requirement, that the date of the election is known, not only defines a necessary condition for a campaign to be under way but also defines the end of a campaign. The beginning is harder to identify. If *all* these things are true, then a campaign is certainly under way. But a campaign may be under way if only some are true. Or it may not be. In the United States, the date of every election has been known since the ratification of the Constitution. If the incumbent is determined to seek reelection then that person may begin campaigning immediately. Does a transparently reelection-oriented speech delivered early in the incumbent's term qualify as part of the campaign for the next election? This point illustrates the difficulty of locating a campaign's inception.

However, we may learn more by considering that campaigns, whatever their formal institutional definition, are usually characterized by heightened *intensity*.¹ Intensity may not correspond to the formal period of the campaign, as it depends on the intentions of the players themselves. A campaign could easily begin "early" if the candidates take to the hustings well in advance of Election Day, though that is no guarantee that anyone would pay attention. The opposite scenario seems less likely but is possible. What then is intensity, and who can exhibit it?

Minimally defined, a campaign is the period right before citizens make a real political choice. This common knowledge typically heightens citizens' attention to politics in direct relation to the proximity of the event. Concomitantly, campaign activity is more likely to register on voters' minds as Election Day draws near. Thus there is an interaction between campaign effort and the approaching "deadline" of Election Day. Evidence

of greater salience for voters could manifest itself in, for example, media attentiveness, campaign interest, political discussion, knowledge about candidates, and strength of vote intention.

Another indicator of intensity is the effort put into the campaign by parties and candidates, which usually increases as the campaign progresses. This increase may come in total outlays, such as a flurry of television advertising, or merely in a different distribution of the same overall amount of effort, such that the campaign seems more intense to (some) voters and the media. For instance, in the last month of a presidential campaign, candidates constantly travel to swing states with large Electoral College delegations. In the 1988 Canadian campaign, the parties focused their advertisements more closely on the central issue, the Canada–U.S. Free Trade Agreement, and on the respective credibility of the leaders in addressing this issue. The battle seemed more furious, even if expenditures did not increase much. Measuring campaign effort means attending to both time and money, as dollars and hours spent are the most fundamental indicators. Conventions, debates, appearances, voter mobilization, and television advertising are all manifestations of time and/or money.

A final indicator of intensity is mass media attention to the campaign. Without it, a campaign may be the proverbial tree falling unheard in the woods. Presumably media coverage reflects what will attract an audience, and this in turn reflects a judgment about the interest of the story and about the attentiveness of potential viewers or readers. Any campaign story should be more interesting if the audience is ready for it, and the audience may be more ready the closer is their moment of choice. We might then expect media attention to increase toward the end of the campaign. Even if it does not increase in total volume, it should, like party effort, become more focused, though not so much on the key elements of the electorate as on the key elements of the choice. Coverage might focus on the front-runners. If the winner seems clear early, coverage might shift to who will finish second or whether a minor player will clear some threshold. If none of the usual stories seems interesting, the media may be tempted to invent one.

The institutional definition of campaigns suggests that campaigns are like election dates—either they exist or they do not. But the move toward intensity suggests that campaigns can be graduated from those that barely exist to those that consume voters, parties, and the media. Scholars of Senate elections in particular have incorporated gradations of intensity

(Kahn and Kenney 1999a; Westlye 1983, 1991).² In his study of congressional races, Zaller (1989, 1996) pinpoints "information flow" as a key variable. The amount of information flow and the extent to which that flow is "two-sided" (that is, coming from both candidates) shape public opinion. Gradations of intensity can often be pinned to level of office. Presidential campaigns are more intense than many legislative races, which in turn are generally more intense than races for local offices, such as city council. Of course, there can also be variation over time within levels of office—for example, some presidential campaigns are more competitive or intense than others, and any given campaign is more intense in battleground states than in the others (Shaw 1999c). Arguably, when defining a campaign, the crucial thing is that all campaigns are not equal. The three pieces to the intensity puzzle—voters, candidates, and the media—must be studied carefully to see how they relate and how this matters for campaign effects.

Defining Campaign Effects

To gain initial purchase on campaign effects, we begin by reviewing five of the most important book-length treatments of the subject. Then we summarize their findings and those from other relevant literature into a typology of campaign effects.

The prevailing scholarly consensus on campaigns is that they have minimal effects. Minimal effects mean in essence minimal persuasion. Because of the existing information and prejudices that voters possess, campaigns rarely change their minds. Often, this view is said to originate with the early studies of the Columbia School (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948). For example, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues found that during the 1940 presidential campaign over half of their sample had decided on a candidate by June and only 8 percent actually switched their intention from one candidate to the other during the campaign.

However, this simple fact in no way encapsulates the findings of these two studies, as is sometimes implied. For example, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948, 87) argue that even early deciders benefited from the reinforcing effect of campaign discourse: "political communication served the important purposes of preserving prior decisions instead of initiating new decisions. It kept the partisans 'in line' by reassuring them in their vote decision; it reduced defection from the ranks." Moreover, these two

works emphasize how campaigns can “activate” preferences. A substantial fraction of voters who began the campaign undecided or unsure came to a vote choice consonant with their predispositions, namely, sociological facts such as occupational status and religious preference. For example, working-class and Catholic respondents came to support Roosevelt. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948, 73) write that campaigns identify for the voter “a way of thinking and acting which he is already half-aware of wanting.” The net result is the reconstitution of a preexisting party coalition. In their study of the 1948 campaign, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee arrived at a similar conclusion.³ The major trend among their sample of residents from Elmira, New York, was a Truman rally among traditionally Democratic groups such as union members and Catholics. Most interesting, they find that these initially uncertain Democrats came to support Truman as the campaign made certain issues salient, in particular issues that tapped working-class economic concerns. Though few scholars since have picked up on this finding, it is perhaps the prototypical empirical example of priming: the campaign may have converted only a few from Dewey to Truman or vice versa, but it did shape the dimensionality of issue conflict and make certain issues more salient for vote choice.⁴ This finding has been largely overlooked and is not consonant with a minimal effects characterization.⁵

Book-length treatments of campaign effects were virtually unknown for decades after the Columbia School’s initial forays.⁶ This derived both from the emerging minimal effects view of both *Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954) and *The People’s Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948) and from political scientists’ reliance on National Election Studies (NES) data and analyses in the tradition of Campbell et al. (1960), who tended to emphasize long-standing and fairly immutable factors such as party identification.⁷ The NES constitute, to be sure, one of the most valuable collections of public opinion data on politics and elections. However, typically the NES entail only a pre- and postelection cross-sectional survey—an instrument that will not capture most campaign dynamics. There was thus no reason to believe that American elections had campaign effects and not much data to study those effects if one believed otherwise.

However, scholars who looked beyond presidential elections soon began to conclude differently.⁸ Jacobson’s (1983) work on congressional elections demonstrated the powerful effects of candidate spending on outcomes. This spending is essentially an indicator of campaign effort, since so much of it funds such things as television advertising and the daily expenses

incurred while pressing the flesh. Moreover, Bartels's (1987, 1988) work on presidential primaries demonstrated that, in an arena where predispositions like party identification are useless, campaigns have substantial effects. In particular, campaign activity and its attendant media coverage confer viability on candidates. Voters respond accordingly: the more likely it seems that a candidate will win, the more voters gravitate to that candidate.

Most recently, scholars have discovered campaign effects even at the rarified presidential or executive level of government. Johnston et al.'s (1992) study of the 1988 Canadian campaign relied on a unique survey instrument, the rolling cross-section (discussed in more detail later), to explain how campaigns shape public opinion and vote choice. Their findings in many ways build on and elaborate those of the Columbia School. Johnston and his colleagues describe how candidates confront a menu of possible issues, from which they choose some and not others to emphasize. Most important, these strategic choices had direct consequences for voters. In this particular election, the Liberal leader John Turner decided he would stake his candidacy on opposition to the Free Trade Agreement (or FTA, the precursor to NAFTA). His major opponent, the Conservative Brian Mulroney, followed suit with the opposite argument. Because of the leaders' efforts, the FTA came to the fore while another issue, the Meech Lake Accord (which addressed the constitutional place of Quebec), receded. As the campaign progressed, the FTA became the voters' most important issue; voters grew more polarized on this issue (following the hardening positions of their respective parties); arguments intended to change voters' minds on this issue became less effective; and voters' positions on this issue became more important predictors of their vote preference.

The second important finding of this study was a renewed respect for campaign events. In particular, Johnston et al. (1992) track the impact of a seminal debate about midway through the campaign. This debate had a hand in most of the trends cited previously: it helped make the FTA the most salient issue; it polarized partisans on the FTA; it enhanced perceptions of the victor's (John Turner of the Liberal Party) competence; it shifted public opinion more toward the Liberal Party's position on the FTA; and it even boosted the Liberal Party's overall vote share. (Ultimately, however, this did not produce a Turner victory, as the Conservative Brian Mulroney prevailed.) Thus, this campaign had a striking effect on numerous facets of public opinion, an effect traceable in part to a specific campaign event and more generally to elite decision making.

Campaign events play an even greater role in Thomas Holbrook's (1996) book on recent American presidential campaigns. Holbrook situates his work amid the literature on elections forecasting, whose major finding is that election outcomes can be predicted quite well by a few fundamental variables measured well before the outset of the campaign (e.g., Bartels and Zaller 2001; Campbell and Garand 2000; Fair 1978; Hibbs 2000; Lewis-Beck 1992; Rosenstone 1983).⁹ These variables typically include some measure of economic health, the popularity of the incumbent administration, and sometimes the breakdown of vote preference just after the primary season. The predictability of election outcomes is often taken to imply little role for campaigns. Holbrook incorporates these variables by arguing that they establish an equilibrium outcome but that public opinion may deviate from this equilibrium during the campaign due to events such as party conventions and debates. By and large, Holbrook finds that events do shift opinion. Presumably these shifts are manifestations of persuasion—or at least of voters' shifting from indecision to preference—and constitute on their face a refutation of the minimal effects model. However, these effects are dwarfed by the overall impact of national and economic conditions, and thus campaigns can only be influential when these conditions do not overwhelmingly favor one side.¹⁰ The summation of Holbrook's argument might be this: campaigns matter but in limited ways.

Campbell (2000) arrives at much the same conclusion in his study of American presidential campaigns. He argues that presidential campaigns by and large have predictable effects because of several systematic conditions: the election-year economy strongly influences outcomes; incumbents have numerous electoral advantages; and the front-runner's margin of victory tends to narrow as the campaign progresses. However, Campbell emphasizes how campaigns bring about these effects. In other words, we could not predict elections so well if the campaign did not somehow translate objective conditions into an actual outcome.¹¹ Moreover, Campbell finds a potential for unpredictable and unsystematic campaign effects. Examining the deviation between the actual outcome and the outcome predicted by a forecasting model, he finds that, of the thirty-three presidential elections since 1868, an estimated four to six were likely decided by unsystematic factors. His conclusion echoes Holbrook's: "Perhaps the best characterization of campaign effects is that they are neither large nor minimal in an absolute sense, but sometimes large enough to be politically important" (188).¹²

How do these works inform a typology of campaign effects? A first and necessary component is undoubtedly *persuasion*. Regardless of how uncommon it may be, campaigns do change some voters' minds.¹³ Moreover, there is reason to believe the existing minimal effects consensus is based somewhat shakily on only one type of elections, American presidential elections. Studies in other countries or at other levels of office within the United States have yielded different conclusions. Indeed, in his study of why people vote for the opposition party's candidate in congressional races, Zaller (1996, 36) finds that "very large campaign effects—effects of mass communication—do occur."¹⁴ Furthermore, even if the ultimate vote choice does not change, campaigns can certainly shift other sorts of attitudes, such as voters' issue positions, where they locate parties and candidates on these issues, and how they evaluate candidates' characteristics and traits—all of which will still be related to the probability that a voter will support a given candidate. That said, we do not want to discount the role of long-standing predispositions and long-term structural forces. One's social background and party identification, as well as broader economic and political conditions, clearly influence individual vote choices and aggregate election outcomes. But a question lingers, one that we return to subsequently: do these predispositions and conditions always have the same effect? If not, does a campaign's ability to persuade voters change accordingly?

A second kind of campaign effect, one much less noticeable in the extant literature, is *priming*. As observed in the 1948 American presidential election and in the 1988 Canadian election, campaigns can shape public opinion by making certain issues or considerations salient to voters. This can occur with or without a concomitant change in vote choice. Both of these examples found that a particular candidate, Harry Truman in 1948 and John Turner in Canada, tended to benefit (though only temporarily in Turner's case) from attention to these issues. However, priming can also occur even as many people's vote preferences remain constant; as voters learn about the candidates and focus on certain considerations, the underlying structure of these preferences may change. Though the ability of events and the news media to prime is well known (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Krosnick and Brannon 1993), this phenomenon is only now being rigorously investigated in the campaign effects literature (e.g., Carsey 2000; Johnston et al. 1992; Kahn and Kenney 1999a; Mendelberg 2001; Mendelsohn 1996; Simon 2002; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002).¹⁵ This phenomenon may be all the more im-

portant if priming is indeed the mechanism by which voters are "enlightened" and, as Holbrook (1996), Campbell (2000), and Gelman and King (1993) suggest, fundamental conditions such as the state of the economy come to influence election outcomes so strongly.¹⁶ If this is true, then particular attention should be paid to "valence" issues, such as the state of the economy, where there is general consensus on the end (prosperity in this case) but dissensus on who can get us there. To look at valence issues in this way is somewhat unorthodox, in that some scholars (Campbell 2000; Popkin 1991) argue that economic voting is "easy" because it involves easily available information about one's personal financial circumstance.¹⁷ However, one cannot assume that such "easy" cues are automatic: one factor in Al Gore's loss in 2000 was his failure to "prime" voters' quite positive assessments of the national economy (Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004). This may explain why in 2000 so many forecasting models, which hinge on "fundamentals" like the economy, overestimated Gore's vote share. In this volume, Ansolabehere ("The Paradox of Minimal Effects") describes how economic voting might be swayed by public information provided by the campaign, and Bartels ("Priming and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns") provides evidence that campaigns in fact prime economic considerations.¹⁸

We must also consider whether "position" issues, where there is actual disagreement over the end, may be even more susceptible to priming in that they tend to distinguish the two candidates more clearly and thus could be expected to polarize voters. A key consideration here is the dimensionality of issue conflict in a given political system. Where do the cleavages lie? Which are interparty and which are intraparty? For example, in the United States we commonly distinguish economic and social issues, since it is possible to be, for example, a pro-choice fiscal conservative. In this volume Highton ("Alternative Tests for the Effects of Campaigns and Candidates on Voting Behavior") demonstrates voter response to candidate position taking on abortion. Alvarez and Shankster ("Studying Statewide Political Campaigns") trace how campaign advertising in two 1994 California races directly shaped the issues voters considered in choosing a candidate.¹⁹

Priming is not only a process with consequences for voters. It also can affect the balance of partisan forces and, ultimately, the election as a whole. As voters come to weight certain considerations more heavily, the probability of their choosing the candidate who benefits from those considerations will increase. For example, a pro-choice voter will gravitate

increasingly toward the pro-choice candidate as abortion becomes a salient election-year issue. Candidates thus have an incentive to structure the election's agenda as much as possible.²⁰ Priming will solidify the support of their partisans and potentially lure swing voters into their camp as well. Finally, priming has implications for how we interpret elections: its impact on the election's agenda will speak strongly to the perennial question, "What was this election about?"

Persuasion and priming are perhaps most prominent in this typology of campaign effects, but they are by no means exhaustive. In particular, we want to consider two others, one quite straightforward and the other much more subtle. First, campaigns obviously affect voters by *informing* and *mobilizing* them. Voters begin the campaign in a state of comparative ignorance. From a normative perspective, we hope that the campaign will capture their attention and inspire them to learn about and cogitate on the choice before them. Of course, the extent of that cogitation is always an open question. Nevertheless, a number of studies have shown that campaigns educate voters about the candidates and in particular about their stands on certain issues (Alvarez 1998; Conover and Feldman 1989; Dalager 1996; Franklin 1991; Holbrook 1999; Marcus 1982; see Jacobson and Fournier essays, this volume).²¹

As noted, informing is bound up with a host of other related effects—growing interest, attention to campaign news, and so forth—but perhaps the most important of these effects is the propensity to vote. That is, campaigns may help to mobilize voters (Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko 1985; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Gerber and Green 2000a, 2000b). Chief among these means is direct contact with voters, such as a phone call or a knock at the door. Acknowledging mobilization as a campaign effect also allows us to consider the opposite case, when campaigns could conceivably *demobilize* voters. The logic here, documented most thoroughly by Ansolabehere et al. (1994) and Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), is that "negative" campaigning alienates voters so much that they grow to dislike both candidates and therefore stay home on Election Day. Though, empirically speaking, the jury is still out on this thesis, it nonetheless draws our attention to the potentially deleterious effects of campaigns and, in particular, contemporary modes of campaign activity such as the "attack ad."²² While these studies all deal with campaigns' secular effects on turnout, it is equally likely that mobilization could have

partisan consequences as well. While it is a truism that candidates want to mobilize their followers and to encourage their opposition to stay home, political science has as yet failed to investigate this phenomenon.

Second, campaigns can alter voters' *strategic considerations*. We can imagine two kinds of strategic issues that a campaign may influence. One such issue is electoral viability, which seems especially relevant under the plurality formula but can also be relevant for threshold requirements under proportional representation (PR). The other is a coalitional signal, which seems most pertinent under PR.

Campaigns provide voters an opportunity to update their expectations of each candidate's or party's chances of success. In the American context, this notion is particularly relevant in primary elections. When there is an absence of partisan cues and a bewildering array of candidates, many of them strangers, viability becomes paramount. As discussed previously, voters prefer candidates who seem like they can win (Bartels 1987, 1988)—a tendency no doubt supported by media eager to cover the horse race among these candidates (Patterson 1980, 1994; Brady and Johnston 1987). In multiparty systems, party viability is also an important consideration for voters (see the Blais, Gidengil, and Nevitte and the Jenkins essays, this volume).

Under certain kinds of PR, a party's probability of meeting threshold requirements may be a factor in choice. In New Zealand, for instance, the main way for a party to win seats in the house is to win at least 5 percent of the national popular vote. In 1996, as it happened, the smaller parties of the Right were in particular danger of failing to achieve this level of support. There might thus have been an incentive for Rightist voters to shift from the largest conservative party to one or the other of two smaller ones. Campaign-period polls could factor into these considerations (see the Johnston and Vowles essay, this volume).

A campaign is also an obvious site for signaling by potential coalition partners. A party's willingness to take on certain partners may enhance or detract from its support. A party may alienate support by seeming too willing to embrace an unacceptable partner. Another possibility is this: if you wish to defect from your "usual" party to a "new" party it might help that this new party is willing to enter into a coalition with the one you traditionally support. None of this absolutely must happen in the campaign, but the campaign may be the most effective time to send the signal.

What Is the Scope for Manipulation?

When investigating campaign effects, we must avoid reductionist research questions such as "Do campaigns matter?" The research discussed previously demonstrates that a better question is this: When and how do campaigns matter? Campaign effects are themselves quite variable, and therefore we must identify which conditions narrow or broaden the scope for manipulation. One such factor is the *number of parties and candidates*. As noted already, primary election outcomes in the United States are often surprising and seem highly contingent on campaign activity. Similarly, an election featuring numerous minor and major parties can have both qualitatively and quantitatively different campaign effects than one with only two contenders for the throne. A related factor is the *dimensionality of issue conflict*. This concerns not only long-standing fissures in the party system but also new ones that might emerge during a campaign, perhaps thanks to the entrepreneurial efforts of a candidate. We need to also consider the *competitiveness* of the race at hand. A runaway victory usually requires no great campaign genius. But an equally matched race, with equal resources on and "messages flows" from both sides, could make campaign events and activity more meaningful. Fundamental *economic and political conditions* will themselves affect the degree of competitiveness and may dictate messages and strategies.

Besides these broader contextual considerations, there are those that pertain to candidates and voters themselves. For one, a *candidate's record* often comes into play. Candidates cannot create themselves *de novo* and thus may find that past words and deeds constrain their impact on voters. Parties face a comparable constraint in *issue ownership*: they often cannot credibly claim that they will act on an issue they had previously ignored.²³ The *novelty of issues* is similarly limiting. Voters tend to have firmer opinions on long-standing issues, opinions that remain steady amid campaign winds. However, new issues, whether raised by a candidate or arising from external events, may prove more amenable to campaign manipulation. Finally, we must account for heterogeneity among voters in terms of their attention and exposure to campaign activity. Perhaps the key variable here is *political awareness*. Voters will be most susceptible to persuasion in particular, at medium levels of awareness, as the well aware are too set in their ways and the least aware are not paying attention.²⁴ (See the Gidengil and Everitt essay in this volume for intriguing evidence that a voter's *gender* conditions how he or she responds to news coverage of candidates.)

A nuanced and promising scholarly agenda starts with the premise that there is more to campaigns than persuasion—priming, informing, mobilizing—and thus perhaps the minimal effects hypothesis misleads. This agenda should treat campaign effects not as dichotomies that do or do not exist but as variables or continua that depend on history, current circumstance, and the voters themselves.

Studying Campaign Effects

The hypothesis we want to explore is that political campaigns matter. We want to know the following: Do campaigns persuade voters, and, if so, which voters? Do campaigns prime certain issues or considerations? If so, which ones and for whom? Do campaigns stimulate voter interest and ultimately voter turnout? Do campaigns shape strategic considerations as well? The next logical question is, How do we investigate these questions? What research designs are useful for studying campaign effects? Next we identify the major ways that scholars have explored campaign effects and discuss each design's strengths and weaknesses.

Laboratory Experiments

The advantages of experiments are well known. Establishing causality is relatively unambiguous as long as the design possesses internal validity. Experiments eliminate competing causal explanations via random assignment and thereby isolate the causal impact of some treatment. In the case of campaign effects, experiments enable the researcher to create a very specific stimulus, which might be a television ad or printed material related to a candidate or race, and then to examine its impact (examples include Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994, 1995; and Mendelberg 1997).

On the other hand, it may be hard to establish a laboratory context that is credible for subjects. Although Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) created such a context—in that subjects viewed campaign media in a casual setting that resembled the average living room—we wonder how much further their approach can be pushed (see Ansolabehere's other essay in this volume, "Campaigns as Experiments," for more discussion of the challenges facing experimental research). Even for credible setups, there remains the problem of external validity. Does "looking real" mean "being real"? At most the

laboratory can establish potential, rather than actual, impact. Some treatments may never find campaign analogues. Moreover, in the laboratory, exposure is controlled and every subject receives the stimulus. In the field, exposure is a variable and those most persuadable may be least exposed.

Field Experiments

Until recently, field experiments in political science were quite rare, and experiments specifically about campaigns were more so. One kind of field experiment embeds the treatment within a survey questionnaire. Respondents then randomly receive question wording variations and so forth. Examples of this technique include the 1988 and 1992–93 Canadian Election Studies and the 1994 Missouri study by Paul Sniderman and his colleagues (see the Elms and Sniderman essay, this volume). A second kind of field experiment is the one employed by Gerber and Green (2000a, 2000b) in New Haven, Connecticut. In this case, New Haven voters were randomly assigned to receive various get-out-the-vote materials. The field experiment retains the advantages of random assignment and compensates for some of the disadvantages of the laboratory because it does not require an artificial setting. It can be even more effective if conducted during an actual campaign.

On the other hand, field experiments cannot create all manner of campaign stimuli. The New Haven study, for example, employed treatments involving leaflets, phone calls, and face-to-face contact. However, it may be more difficult to design a true field experiment that could capture a more complex stimulus, such as an advertising campaign. Most important, the field experiment shares the laboratory's limitation: it identifies a potential rather than an actual effect.²⁵

Panels

The panel design seems the natural starting point for analyzing campaign-induced change in that it generates observations potentially straddling a "treatment." Only a panel permits characterization of individual trajectories. Change across waves cannot possibly derive from sampling error (although it can be a regression artifact). Given enough waves, the panel also allows the researcher to separate instability from unreliability; that is, it addresses the errors-in-variables problem directly. Bartels (1993) shows con-

vincingly that measurement error in indicators such as media exposure attenuates their impact on political preferences and thus understates the potential effect of the campaign. Furthermore, if we know in advance the events and the periods we want to cover, for example, a debate and a specific period after the debate, the panel is the most effective way of identifying event-induced change. (See the Bartels essay, this volume, for further discussion of these and other advantages of panels. Extant empirical studies include, *inter alia*, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Patterson 1980; Markus 1982; Bartels 1993; Finkel 1993; Norris et al. 1999; Hillygus and Jackman 2003.)

With these great advantages come serious disadvantages. One is an instrument effect: an interview may affect subsequent responses so much that observed changes may result from nothing but previous interviews. Mortality in the panel raises questions about the representativeness of later waves, particularly in terms of their susceptibility to influence and change. Diligent pursuit of respondents across later waves can be expensive.

The biggest issue, however, may be the crudeness of the panel's "granularity." The greater the gap between waves, the harder it is to identify campaign effects as competing explanations accumulate. Even when a single event could explain shifts, as with a debate, identifying its impact necessitates conditioning on cross-sectional differences, for example, in exposure. Infrequent waves will reduce the residual effects of exposure. Consider the example of a debate that succeeds in changing people's minds. Right after the debate, differences between those who did and did not see the debate tend to be large. But as time passes, this difference will shrink as the broadly held interpretation of the debate permeates the population. If we are fortunate enough to be in the field right after the debate, we can at least capture the direct impact but will still miss the indirect effect, barring yet another wave. If the second wave is late, we will miss everything. The waves should register the net shift, of course, but how will it be pinned to the debate?

The Rolling Cross-Section

The rolling cross-section (RCS) addresses these concerns. Because it typically is composed of daily samples, its granularity is very fine. The design does not precommit researchers to timing, to events, or to a theory of dynamic form. For certain plausible models, for example, diffusion models

with curvilinear trajectories, it may be the only design that can capture the hypothesized effect. And the design is cheap. It costs little more than an ordinary cross-section. Garnering adequate daily samples does require some micromanagement, and the response rate must be allowed to drop off at the very end, but these problems pose no fundamental difficulties. The RCS has been implemented in several Canadian Election Studies (see Johnston et al. 1992, *inter alia*) and most recently in the Annenberg National Election Studies of 2000 and 2004 (Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004).

In principle, the RCS can be married to a panel design, where the first wave precedes the campaign and the RCS component is, in effect, a "metered" panel. So long as the net partisan direction of impact from the campaign does not change mid-period, it suffices to interview each respondent only once during the campaign. Stretches of the campaign can be treated as subpanels. To capture the campaign's cumulative impact, however, it would be necessary to go into the field a third time, after Election Day. Arguably, making the RCS the first wave and then reinterviewing after the event can realize much of the advantage of marrying the RCS to a panel.²⁶ At the same time, the response captured during the campaign proper is uncontaminated by instrument effects.

A major disadvantage of the RCS is that the daily sample is small. Just how small is a function of the total target sample and the campaign's length in days. Describing aggregate trends over time requires smoothing to separate real change from sampling noise (see the Brady and Johnston essay in this volume for a discussion of smoothing). Second, the RCS simply cannot solve the errors-in-variables problem, unless it is joined to at least two more waves (but this is also true of a conventional cross-section). Finally, to interpret dynamic trends persuasively, contextual information about media coverage and events is necessary. This enables one to link, say, a sudden downturn in a candidate's fortune to breaking news about a scandal, a poor debate performance, and so forth. Collecting and analyzing contextual data is difficult in two senses. First, it is time-consuming, especially when these data must be coded in some fashion to generate interpretable quantities. Second, there is no strong theory to guide coding and to suggest the shape and duration of effects that may result from certain kinds of campaign events (see Brady and Johnston 1987 for one coding scheme and Shaw 1999a for a discussion of event effects). Of course, it is fundamentally a strength of the RCS that it can be so fruitfully married to contextual data of this kind.

Multiple Races

The 1978 NES was the prototype of this design, with random samples from a large number of congressional districts. The NES Senate Election Studies have continued in this same tradition. This is, in fact, the oldest form of systematic investigation of campaign effects, going back to Jacobson's (1983) work on congressional elections. The crucial aspect of this design is that it samples districts, not respondents (Stoker and Bowers 2002). This ensures greater variation across settings, in candidates, races, party effort, media attention, and voter characteristics. Where the dependent variable is measured from a survey, the design allows employment of the whole sample (but see the next paragraph). It is rich in possibilities for "naturalistic" controls—for example, in the case of the U.S. Senate, one can examine the same state in years with and without an election.²⁷ However, in the case of Senate elections, the sample must also be designed to capture variation in races across states (Westlye 1983). This is the chief advantage of the NES Senate Election Studies.

There is, of course, the danger that any independent variable of interest may be correlated with idiosyncratic or fixed effects across the races so that it mistakenly picks up these fixed effects. The design may not address selection problems, and certain measurable variables may not really be predetermined. For example, do debates build interest or are they more likely to be held in states where interest is already high? The design is as reliant as others on exogenous information, such as candidate spending.²⁸ Finally, dynamic effects will be missed by this purely cross-sectional design.

Same Cross-Section, Different Elections

This design gains leverage from the traditional cross-sectional design by analyzing the same respondents as they vote in different races (see the Alvarez and Shankster and the Elms and Sniderman essays, this volume). In a way, this design is like a panel on the cheap, in that it permits comparison of repeated behavior by the same respondents. The behavior is virtually simultaneous, of course, but this is actually a strength, for the respondent must be essentially the same person each time, however divergent the behavior. In principle, then, just estimating the same equation on the same respondents for different races can identify certain campaign effects. When variation across coefficients is married to exogenous data, for example, the

content of advertising, the story can be quite powerful. The design does leave causal questions open. For example, what if people—candidates, voters, or both—*always* behave in characteristically different ways in different arenas? And in the end, the design is still not quite a panel, and so true dynamics cannot be captured.

These research designs draw attention to two key dimensions: time and space. Panel studies and RCSs tell dynamic stories, stories of how people's ideas and intentions change in the weeks and months preceding an election. When married with contextual data like events and advertising, one can tell even more nuanced stories about how the money and time that candidates and parties spend actually shape people's ideas and intentions. But even if data are not ordered over time, spatial variation can provide explanatory leverage. Examining multiple elections allows one to compare lopsided races where a heavily favored incumbent ran roughshod over some poor challenger with hard-fought races where two equally matched candidates slugged it out or to compare races where the campaign turned on the performance of the incumbent with races where it turned on a hot-button issue. The evolution of American presidential elections in particular may make the conjoint study of time and space easier: the increased concentration of campaign activity in battleground states is making the country into a giant natural experiment (see Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004). So far, however, the potential of expanding both time and space in campaign studies has only barely been explored.

Campaigns and Democratic Theory

That campaigns do influence citizens is fundamentally good news. Campaigns are the moments in political life when representatives and the represented interact most energetically. It would thus disappoint if voters largely tuned out and voted only in rote and ritualistic partisan ways. The recent research discussed herein suggests that, when candidates press the flesh and go on the air, voters are listening and learning. Campaigns can affect what voters know, whether they will vote, whom they will vote for, and why they will vote for that person. Ultimately, campaigns can affect who wins the election. Thus, the strategic decisions of candidates are not merely empty exercises in collective war-room intellect. Both the inputs and outputs of campaign processes can be consequential.

But this raises another, more disconcerting possibility. What if campaigns function not so much to enlighten voters as to manipulate them? Manipulation entails two things: a candidate must make an unseemly statement, and voters must believe it. The meaning of *unseemly* could be debated endlessly, but ultimately such debate is rendered at least somewhat moot if the second condition fails to hold true. We believe that two conditions militate against manipulation. First and foremost, voters do not believe everything they are told. New information is filtered first through existing partisan predispositions. Second, new information, when it speaks strongly for or against one party or candidate, will typically not go unchallenged. This is to say, campaign discourse is contested. Claims by one party are contradicted by another. Furthermore, the media scrutinizes and evaluates the claims of all parties. The very nature of campaigns prevents any one side from single-handedly manipulating the electorate. However, this works best when the campaign is competitive, when all parties and candidates have the resources to make themselves heard. Arguably, then, the best way to limit campaign manipulation is to have more of a campaign.

NOTES

1. Intensity is related to, but distinct from, competitiveness. A competitive election is one in which the outcome is in question. An intense campaign is one contested doggedly by the candidates or parties, regardless of whether any or all of them has a real chance of winning. Our guess is that all competitive elections have intense campaigns but that not all intense campaigns correspond to a competitive election.

2. Westlye (1983) distinguishes between "hard-fought" and "low-key" races, and he uses preelection descriptions of Senate contests in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report's* biennial special election issue. Westlye notes, "The CQ descriptions usually focus on such matters as media coverage of the candidates, levels of public interest in the campaign, and candidate organization and campaigning skills" (259). Kahn and Kenney (1999a) argue for a single dimension of campaign intensity, operationalized as an index combining candidate activities, media reports, and competition. For our part, we believe that concrete indicators are generally preferable to the judgments of observers—especially because they can often be measured as continuous variables and not as dichotomies—and that intensity may in fact be multidimensional.

3. Finkel (1993) also arrives at this conclusion in his examination of panel data from the 1980 presidential election.

4. Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954, 183) elaborate how campaigns shape issue dimensions: "the political process which finds its climax in the campaign is a system by which disagreements are reduced, simplified, and generalized

into one big residual difference of opinion. It is a system for *organizing* disagreements."

5. To our knowledge, only Popkin (1991, 108–10) and Johnston (1992, 313) have noted explicitly that the Columbia School's results constitute priming. Gelman and King (1993, 433–34) present a general case for this finding when they describe the process of "enlightenment": "The function of the campaign, then, is to inform voters about the fundamental variables and their appropriate weights."

6. A notable exception is Patterson (1980), who keeps the Columbia tradition alive by analyzing a panel survey conducted in two communities—Erie, Pennsylvania, and Los Angeles—during the 1976 presidential campaign. He does not, however, emphasize the same themes, focusing more on voters' exposure and reaction to media coverage than on "campaign effects" per se.

7. Some have argued, however, that even party identification, that "unmoved mover," can shift during a campaign (Allsop and Weisberg 1988; but see Johnston 1992).

8. To the credit of the NES, this work was facilitated in part by some innovative NES surveys, notably the 1978 Congressional Election Study and the 1984 Rolling Cross-Section Study.

9. Though he is not in the business of election forecasting per se, Bartels (1998) examines historical dynamics in presidential elections and concludes that there is a great deal more electoral continuity than volatility. Like predictability, continuity seems to imply a lesser role for campaigns.

10. Shaw (1999a) elaborates Holbrook's work by estimating the duration of event effects but reaches similar conclusions about the magnitude of these effects. Likewise, Shaw (1999b) examines two other forms of campaign activity, campaign appearances and television advertising, and finds that each tended to move voter support. However, he again reaches a qualified conclusion: "Too much should not be made of the campaign effects discovered here—no elections would have been reversed without implausible changes in the distribution of campaigning in several key states" (357).

11. Holbrook (1996, 157) acknowledges this possibility—"One of the important roles of the campaign is to help move public opinion toward the expected outcome"—but does not make it an explicit part of his theory. As yet, political scientists do not necessarily understand how this equilibrating process arises.

12. Wlezien and Erikson (2002) make a strong claim that campaigns really do move the vote. Their approach resembles Holbrook's in relying on compilations of polls, but they apply more sophisticated dynamic modeling to argue that the electorate's response to campaigns resembles a random walk: a campaign's impact at one point in time endures for some time, and further displacement requires another impulse. This seems to be the aggregate analogue to the "on-line processing" model of Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh (1989), in that campaign information is incorporated (more or less permanently) into the running tally constituted by the tracking poll. For all that, Wlezien and Erikson's findings can still be squared with the Holbrook-Campbell imagery of a campaign whose potential impact is constrained by foreordained external factors.

13. Indeed, given that candidates and their campaign operatives generally ignore

the unpersuadables and focus only on so-called swing voters or swing states, it appears that they are aware of their limited power to persuade. Bradshaw (1995, 37) makes this point: "The key to successful strategy is not to try to appeal to everyone on his or her particular flash point but instead to select the types of voters you can most easily persuade based on the contrasts presented by the candidates."

14. Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau (1995) come to a similar conclusion, though they rely on experimental evidence and champion an entirely different model of information processing.

15. Priming is related to another process, agenda setting. Agenda setting concerns the problems citizens consider most important (see, e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Erbring and Goldenberg 1980; MacKuen and Coombs 1981; McCombs and Shaw 1972).

16. Holbrook and Campbell cannot really test the hypothesis that campaigns prime fundamental considerations because they rely on aggregate data, while priming is an individual-level phenomenon.

17. However, Hetherington (1996) shows that negative media coverage of the economy shaped economic evaluations in the 1992 presidential race and thereby contributed to George Bush's defeat. This suggests that this simple voting cue is actually malleable.

18. Candidate traits could also be considered a "valence issue," in the sense that everyone agrees that candidates should be honest, intelligent, and so on. Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004) identify changing perceptions of Gore's honesty as the key dynamic in the 2000 election. Johnston et al. (1992) demonstrate that campaigns can prime candidate traits as well (see also Mendelsohn 1996).

19. We do not address here possible emotional responses to candidates, as documented by Marcus and MacKuen (1993) and Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000).

20. The strategic benefits of priming, as contrasted to a Downsian convergence on the median voter, are discussed by Riker (1983) as "heresthetics" and by Hammond and Humes (1993) and Carsey (2000).

21. Moreover, contrary to Shepsle (1972) and Page (1976), who argue that it benefits a candidate to be obfuscatory and vague about issues, Alvarez (1998) finds that reducing voters' uncertainty improves candidates' standing.

22. Participants in the ongoing debate include Bartels (1996); Finkel and Geer (1998); Freedman and Goldstein (1999); Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon (1999); Kahn and Kenney (1999b); Wattenberg and Briens (1999); Lau et al. (1999); Jamieson (2000); Lau and Pomper (2002); and Clinton and Lapinski (2004).

23. See Petrocik 1996 for evidence of how consonance among voters' and parties' agendas shapes preferences.

24. This argument is, of course, Zaller's (1992). He builds on the work of McGuire (1968, 1969).

25. There is also the possibility that the actual campaign may render an experimental manipulation ineffective. For instance, for the 1988 Canadian election, Johnston et al. (1992) discuss the effect of giving or withholding Brian Mulroney's name as the agent implicitly responsible for negotiating the FTA. This effect, which

became evident only through experimental manipulation within a survey questionnaire, did not persist after the key debate primed the issue once and for all.

26. Johnston and Brady (2002) show the precise conditions under which a post-election reinterview can capture most of the relevant, preelection cross-sectional variation.

27. Franklin (1991) draws upon another natural experiment, comparing perceptions of senators up for election to those of senators not up for election.

28. A noteworthy development in campaign advertising data deserves mention here. Advances in satellite tracking now produce precise information about when and where specific television advertisements appear. For example, these data could tell you that, during the 2000 election, Al Gore aired an advertisement that discussed his education policy on October 24 at 4:47 p.m. on the ABC affiliate in Fresno, California, during an episode of *Oprab*. Freedman and Goldstein (1999) and Goldstein and Freedman (2000) were the first to exploit these data. The Wisconsin Television Advertising Project continues to collect, compile, and release these data.

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