

I. Chapter Overview

A. Learning Objectives

- 14.1 Trace the evolution of political campaigns in the United States
- 14.2 Assess the role of candidates and their staff in the campaign process
- 14.3 Evaluate the ways campaigns raise money
- 14.4 Identify the ways campaigns use the media to reach potential voters
- 14.5 Analyze the 2008 presidential campaign

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B. Chapter Summary

Campaigns start long before most of us notice them. Trial balloons are floated years before the active campaigning begins. Often, political candidates make special efforts to work hard for their party in the run-up to announcing that they would like to be the party's nominee for an office. Some aspirants to political office start out in the local school board or appointive offices first, all the while, harboring desires to run for ever more powerful offices. Some candidates are cajoled, teased, and begged to run by friends, family, their party, the news media, or others. However, all candidates are similar in that each of them makes a decision at some point to run for election.

So once the decision is made, how does one run for election? What happens during a campaign?

Roots of Modern Political Campaigns

No two political campaigns are the same. Each candidate and each candidate's campaign organization make different choices, wage diverse strategies, and have distinctive strengths and weaknesses. However, all campaigns are waged in two parts. First, for the nomination of the candidate's party, and second, the candidate must win over the voters in the general election.

The Nomination Campaign

The nomination campaign is aimed at the party leaders and activists within the party who choose nominees in primaries or conventions. Quite often, the need to appeal to activists pushes a candidate to an ideological extreme. Party leaders are interested in electability, so a candidate must appeal to both constituencies.

Nomination politics start early, often years before an election. As the opening vignette mentioned, the 2008 presidential campaign was already in effect in the fall of 2005. Candidates must cultivate the perception that they can win and that they have momentum. They test out slogans, themes, and strategies hoping to find one that will excite voters. Fund raising is critical in the nomination phase. Only candidates with lots of money are taken seriously.

One of the hazards of the nomination campaign is that candidates can spend too much time and effort appealing to their political base, which is usually more extreme than voters in the general election. This can damage their chances to win in the general election.

The General Election Campaign

Once a candidate has earned the party's nod, the ultimate goal for all candidates is to win the general election. Candidates must woo interest groups and voters, raise money, and get endorsements. The candidate often chooses a slogan and decides which issues are important in his/her campaign.

Assembling a Campaign Staff

Campaign organizations spend tons of money on consultants, pollsters, and professionals. Campaigns are precisely manipulated, candidates are “handled,” and appearances are scripted. However, the single most important factor in any campaign is the candidate!

Campaign techniques can downplay weaknesses and emphasize strengths, but they cannot make a poor candidate win an election most of the time. Most people vote for a candidate, not a slick campaign. Campaigns can enhance the positives and reduce the negatives of a candidate and poorly-run campaigns can lose elections. A well-run campaign with a lousy candidate has few chances of winning.

The Candidate

Candidates run for office for a variety of reasons. They might have policy goals and ideological agenda, personal ambition, or any number of other reasons. To be successful, a candidate has to invest a lot of time and energy pursuing office. They also have to put up with lots of public scrutiny.

Direct contact, or retail politics, is the traditional way to campaign and many candidates still try to meet as many citizens as possible. But for larger campaigns—statewide or national—it is unrealistic for a candidate to meet even a representative sample of constituents.

A candidate's schedule is grueling. Often starting with early breakfast meetings and running until very late at night. A long campaign—like those a presidential candidate wages—can be more about stamina than anything else! The longer the campaign, the more exhausted the candidate, the more likely the gaffes....

The Campaign Staff

Campaign Manager: Campaigns usually have a manager who coordinates and directs the whole campaign. This person is usually a close associate of the candidate and has lots of face time with them.

Finance Chair: This person coordinates all of the finances of the campaign including fundraising, spending and paperwork requirements.

Communication Staff: The communications manager and press secretary work together to manage the campaign's contacts with the media and to work with consultants to develop advertisements. Often the staff now includes an internet team that develops and manages the campaign Web site and social networking connections.

Campaign Consultants: There are also private sector “hired guns,” also known as political consultants, who sell a variety of services to campaigns. Media consultants might create ads or a campaign may hire a polling consultant to run opinion polls that are too big for their own campaign organization to run.

Volunteers: Staff can be paid or volunteer. Volunteers answer phones, distribute campaign literature, staff booths at county fairs, solicit voters door to door, and do vital get out the vote (GOTV) work.

Raising Money:

In 2008, the Democratic and Republican parties raised nearly \$2 billion. Presidential candidates alone raised over \$1.1 billion. Barack Obama, who chose to forgo public financing, raised almost \$700 million (a new record) with over 90 percent raised on the internet from small donors. John McCain raised around \$400 million with half from individual donors and including \$84 million in federal matching funds. The 30 Senate incumbents raised an average of \$6.4 million, while challengers raised an average \$2.5 million.

Regulating Campaign Financing

The expense of elections and the possibility of corruption, especially individuals and groups with lots of money gaining undue influence on the democratic process, have led to numerous attempts at regulating campaign finance. In the 1880s, Congress passed a law to ensure that federal workers would not be pressured to finance political campaigns. In 1907, Congress prohibited corporations from making donations to candidates and a number of other laws addressed these issues as well. But it wasn't until the Watergate scandals of the 1970s that there was any real attempt to limit campaign contributions broadly.

In response to the Watergate scandal, Congress passed the Federal Elections Campaign Act of 1971, 1974, and 1976. The goal of this post-Watergate legislation was to reduce the impact of money on elections and limit the influence of big donors. The law required disclosure of campaign spending and donations. FECA also established the Federal Election Commission to oversee elections and to process/monitor spending disclosures by campaigns. The FECA also established partial public funding for presidential candidates.

In 2002, Congress passed a new law called the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) (formerly McCain-Feingold). The BCRA of 2002 amends the FECA in several important ways: It bans soft money donations to campaigns, increases the amount of hard money individuals may donate to candidates, and imposes new restrictions on political advertising close to an election.

Under the new system, the parties cannot accept soft money contributions for such things as party-building and get out the vote campaigns. This money must come from individuals or PACs as hard money and be counted in the campaign finance limits.

Hard money from PACs remains unchanged under the new law. There was a discussion of indexing contributions to inflation, and thus allowing the limits to creep up, but this was not included in the final bill.

The third, and most controversial, aspect of the new law seeks to close the loophole in the previous law on issue ads. Under the old law, groups ran ads that were obviously in favor of, or opposed to, a candidate but didn't use the terms "vote for" or "vote against" and so, were not considered advocacy ads and not covered under campaign finance limits. Under the new law, any incorporated group (corporations, interest groups, trade unions, etc.) is prohibited from "electioneering communications." In other words, no more ads referring to a specific candidate for federal office can be run by these groups. Individuals and PACs may still do "electioneering communication," but if they spend over \$10,000, there are strict disclosure laws and PACs may not use corporate or union funding on such ads.

Almost immediately, the BCRA was taken to court. The case, *McConnell v. FEC*, was brought by Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and argued that restrictions on soft money were an unconstitutional abridgement of free speech. A district court ruled that BCRA violated free speech. However, in 2003, the Supreme Court ruled 5–4 that the government’s interest in preventing corruption outweighed free speech rights to which parties would otherwise be entitled.

However, in 2007, the Supreme Court struck down the limits on issue-advocacy advertising in the last 30 to 60 days prior to the election. And, in 2010, the Court overruled the ban on electioneering by companies or unions thus opening the door to almost limitless spending by outside groups.

Sources of Campaign Funding

Political money is now regulated by the terms of the BCRA. Unlimited and unregulated donations to political parties, or soft money, have been outlawed. There are limits on individual and group donations to candidates as well.

Individuals

Most candidates receive most of their money from individual contributions and most of these fall well below the legal maximums. The current law allows any individual to donate up to \$2,400 in 2009–2010. A person can also donate up to a total of \$115,500 in gifts to all candidates, PACs, and parties combined in a single calendar year.

Political Party Contributions

Candidates also get money from their party. The Democratic and the Republican Parties have state and national organizations that regularly donate money to campaigns. Each house of Congress also has a branch of the party that raises and gives money for campaigns. In 2006, the two major parties gave \$768 million through direct contributions and coordinated expenditures to their candidates.

Political Action Committee (PAC) Contributions

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of campaign finance is the political action committee. Some see them as corrupt special interests buying candidates and elections. Others think they are more benign. PACs are criticized as being representative mostly of affluent white people and ignoring the interests of the poor and minority groups. Most political scientists see PACs as normal and a natural outgrowth of interest groups and pluralist, democratic politics.

Modern PACs are an outgrowth of campaign finance reform in the 1970s. But it is unclear whether PACs cause interest groups to be more influential or even if there is more interest group money in elections now than prior to 1971. A PAC can give no more than \$5,000 per candidate, per election and \$15,000 to each of the units of the national party. Roughly 4,000 PACs are registered with the FEC.

The charge that PACs only represent certain groups is a serious one. PACs that have “parent organizations”—corporations, labor unions, and trade PACs—have an advantage. The parent can pay for administrative costs, overhead, and so on. PACs formed by individuals must raise money to pay those costs.

Not all PACs are created equal! A mere six percent of PACs contribute 62 percent of the total dollars to congressional candidates. However, PACs do not contribute the bulk of campaign finance, individuals do!

Member PACs

In Congress and state legislatures, incumbents who have large campaign war chests and secure seats give money to their party's candidates who need financial help. Some members have their own PACs.

Personal Savings

The Supreme Court ruled in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) that no limit can be placed on a candidate's own spending. Candidates can spend as much of their personal funds as they like. The Court equated spending one's own money with free speech. There are a few candidates who spend millions of their own money, but most candidates put less than \$100,000 of their own money into their campaigns. In 2004, a candidate for the Senate seat in Illinois, Democrat Blair Hull, spent \$29 million of his own money, but he lost in the primary election. In 2002, twenty candidates for Congress spent over \$1 million of their own money on their campaigns. Only one of them won, Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ). In 2006, Republican Pete Ricketts of Nebraska and Democrat Ned Lamont of Connecticut both lost their bids for the Senate despite spending over \$10 million each of their own money.

Public Funds

Only presidential candidates are eligible for public funding. Public funds come from general tax revenues and candidates must qualify to receive them. Once a major party candidate has raised \$5,000 in individual contributions of \$250 or less in 20 states, he or she becomes eligible for federal matching funds. The government will match whatever money a candidate has raised in increments up to \$251. This money comes from a check-off box on our taxes where we can designate \$3 to go to the campaign fund (fewer than 20 percent of Americans do this). For the general election, each candidate gets a lump sum payment (\$85 million in 2008), and they are limited to spending this amount. Third party candidates receive smaller amounts proportional to their vote total in the last presidential election, as long as they broke the threshold of five percent of the vote. They will only receive their federal funds after the general election, though.

In 2008, all of the major candidates in the primaries opted out of the public funding except John Edwards and opted out of public financing, so they did not have to abide by spending limits during the primary. Barack Obama opted out in the general election and subsequently raised more money than any campaign in history.

Soft Money Groups

In some races candidates receive indirect support through outside groups. They cannot spend money directly on the campaign or advertisements but can fund issue advocacy media that can help a candidate or attack an opponent. There are two types of soft money groups:

527 political committees which are tax exempt and are created to influence the nomination and election of political candidates. They are often associated with PACs.

501c groups which are non-profit, tax exempt groups that engage in voter education and do not have to reveal the names of donors.

Reaching Voters

Politicians and their staff would like to control the media but generally do not succeed. They still try to manipulate it, though. Sometimes, staffs insulate a candidate from the media to prevent gaffs or embarrassments. Campaigns often stage media events designed to offer images, slogans, and sound bites that will be irresistible to the media and, therefore, garner the campaign some free media coverage. Also, handlers and consultants try to spin their story. In other words, they work to put a favorable interpretation on a day's events, a candidate's activities, or a rumor.

Traditional Media

In addition to paid ads, campaigns try to garner the attention of the media to cover their campaign and candidate. The campaign does not have control over free media coverage, though the campaign tries to orchestrate photo ops and other types of media exposure that will benefit its candidate.

Campaigns often fax dozens of statements a day to key journalists in hopes of garnering positive press coverage. These tactics often fail because journalists are wise to the tactics and don't like being manipulated.

Strategies to Control Media Coverage

During campaign season, the news media report a lot of political news. However, no broadcast or print media source has unlimited resources and unlimited space, so what they show or print is a matter of choices. These choices are made by editors and producers. What we are shown or read is a selection of a much broader campaign.

How the information is presented also represents a choice. On TV, a report can show actual footage of a speech or a reporter can simply say that "candidate A" made a speech on health care today and so on. In a newspaper, editors can choose to print an entire speech, excerpts, or just a reporter's account of what was said. Alternatively, the media could choose not to report the speech and focus on personal matters like a candidate's marriage or college grades. How and why are these choices made?

Many components go into these decisions. The nature of the media, for example, often determines what is reported. TV is more likely to go for active and visual images. Print media are more likely to focus on the storyline in words. TV tends to have very short reports and print media can often go more in-depth. What else happened that day matters. If there's a tsunami or a huge local story that day, routine campaign activities will receive far less coverage. Polls matter; candidates that have a chance of winning get more media attention than those who are perceived as potential losers. The media outlet's perspective on their audience matters as well. What do the editors and producers think their readers and viewers want to see? Of course, bias matters as well...but bias isn't as easy as liberal/conservative. There are many different kinds of bias in the media, including "bottom line bias"—worries about how a story will affect their sales or viewership.

The media not only report the news, they reflect their environment as well. Stories running in New Hampshire are going to be different from those in Arizona. Rural papers may present stories differently than city papers. National papers may report stories differently than regional, state, or local papers. TV stations with younger audience demographics will do things differently than those with older audience demographics.

When you watch media, think about all of these different issues and how they affect what you see or read.

Voters want information and tend to think that media coverage is more credible than campaign literature. So, campaigns strive to get media coverage that is positive and beneficial to the campaign. To do this, campaign managers use a number of strategies. Because candidates might accidentally say something that could hurt their campaign, many campaign managers limit press access to candidates. The media press for free access to the candidate and chafe at the limitations. Campaigns stage media events or photo ops for the media and craft speeches with sound bites that are positive and easily useable by the media. Consultants practice the art of “spin.” Spin is interpretation. For example, when Howard Dean lost the Iowa Caucus in 2004, his campaign used spin to try and reinterpret the results in a positive light. However, spin doesn’t always work and can backfire. Candidates also appear on talk shows, such as *Oprah*, *The Daily Show*, and *Larry King Live*, where they can present their views in a less critical atmosphere.

In the late 1950s, the advent of television changed the nature of campaigning. In 2004, Howard Dean pioneered new uses for the Internet in campaigns. TV, Internet, and other technological advances have enabled candidates and campaigns to reach voters more quickly, and more often, than any other time in history. Consequently, large numbers of political volunteers are less necessary today than they were in the past. This reduces a candidate’s need for party support. It has also been one factor in making campaigns more candidate-centered.

These advances have also created a need for speed. Campaigns today practice rapid response techniques, inoculation ads, containment strategies, and opposition research—an array of techniques to fight the fast moving “war” as many political professionals see it (the Clinton campaign even called their headquarters, “the War Room”). Specific examples of these techniques include: recorded phone messages by the candidates (robocalls) or those who endorse them (begun in 2002), video streaming of candidate speeches, and 24/7 information on the campaign and how to donate money to it.

Debates are a hybrid of paid and free media. Debates today are mostly well-practiced and well-scripted, but there are still slips of the tongue and some spontaneity. The importance of debates is usually overrated. They usually firm up a voter’s opinion and rarely change anyone’s mind, although debates probably do sway some undecided voters.

The New Media

Technology has been changing campaigning for years. The Internet is only the newest tool in political campaigning. Mass e-mails, faxes, recorded phone calls, and other high tech tactics have sped up what happens in a campaign. Instead of having weeks to respond to attack ads, campaigns now respond within hours. Instead of blanketing an entire zip code with direct mail, campaigns can now use databases to target those most likely to receive their message positively via e-mail or by recorded phone calls. In the last presidential election, celebrities like Bill Clinton and Chris Rock recorded phone messages for the Democrats and Arnold Schwarzenegger recorded one for the Republicans.

Blogs are the newest of the new Internet campaign tools. These Web logs allow almost instant communication with supporters and can help create great a buzz for a campaign. Blogs

have made rapid responses and spin even quicker. Web sites have also become great ways to raise money. All the 2008 presidential candidates used the Web and most used social networking sites like *MySpace* and *Facebook* as well.

Campaign Advertisements

Campaigns pay for ads on television and radio. Therefore, the content of paid media is determined by the campaign. Ads can be positive or negative and can contrast voting records, personalities, or issue positions. Using inoculation ads, an advertisement designed to stave off the attacks of the other campaigns often before they have occurred, has become popular. Many campaign managers believe that “an attack unanswered is an attack agreed to” and so they respond to negative ads quickly.

Toward Reform: The 2008 Presidential Campaign

The 2008 election was long and expensive. The election was also contentious and a source of anxiety for many. People had doubts about Obama’s experience and McCain’s age, among other things. And once the financial crisis hit in the fall of 2008, the stakes seemed incredibly high.

The Nomination Campaigns

With no incumbent candidate and no sitting vice president on either ticket, the nomination contest drew a large number of contenders with 9 on the Democratic side and 13 on the Republican at their zenith.

On the **Democratic** side, Hillary Clinton appeared to be the front runner early on. Obama’s firm anti war stance and his performance at the 2004 Democratic National Convention gave him a good share of the spotlight as well, especially after he won the Iowa Caucuses. Then Clinton won New Hampshire. The two continued to battle throughout the season. Both were well funded and had avid supporters. The contest did not end until June 5 when Hillary Clinton officially conceded to Barack Obama.

The **Republicans** had more drama since there was no real frontrunner. In 15 debates, the crowded field vied for votes. Mitt Romney took an early lead but social conservatives were uncomfortable with him. Fred Thompson pleased the social conservative base but lacked excitement. Eventually, John McCain came out on top as the Republican nominee after a long battle.

The Party Conventions

The Democratic National Convention met from August 25–28 in Denver, Colorado. Obama had chosen Senator Joe Biden (D,DE) as his running mate despite speculation that he would choose Hillary Clinton. Both Clintons pledged their firm support for the Democratic ticket at the convention. Senator Obama accepted the nomination in front of a crowd of 86,000 at a sports stadium with another 39 million watching on television. He gave his speech, as the first African American major party nominee for president, on the 45th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

A mere 12 hours after the Democratic convention ended, McCain announced his running mate Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. She was the second woman on a presidential ticket from a major party and the first Republican woman.

The Republican base was ecstatic. She was a strong social conservative, mother of five, and had a record of government reform in Alaska.

The Republican National Convention was held in St. Paul Minnesota from September 1–4. Palin’s speech was the highpoint. Due to the threat of a major hurricane, neither President Bush nor VP Dick Cheney addressed the convention, which was probably a good thing since they had extremely low approval ratings at the time.

The General Election Campaign

As the election drew nearer, the economy went into freefall. Instead of focusing on the war in Iraq and other foreign policy issues (a McCain strength), the entire campaign became about the economy (an Obama strength). As the first debate neared, the economy plummeted and McCain announced a suspension of his campaign and said he would not be able to make the debate. Shortly thereafter, he decided he would debate. The incident made him look impulsive and out of touch. Obama, on the other hand, had looked steady and presidential. The first debate broke no new ground. Obama came across as calm, confident, and with a firm grasp of the issues. McCain seemed uneven but his experience and foreign policy credentials were evident. Opinion polls showed Obama the “winner” of the debate.

Voters’ opinions of Palin, however, were changing. Initially, many people had been positive and the Republican base enthusiastic, but she was kept away from the media during the first weeks. Finally, interviews with ABC and CBS were approved and in her interview with Katie Couric of CBS, Palin appeared flustered and uninformed on basic issues. She regained some support after the vice presidential debates but many voters remained concerned. Over 70 million people watched the vice presidential debate and another 14 million watched Palin’s performance on *Saturday Night Live* (which had drawn huge ratings with Tina Fey’s Palin impersonation).

The second presidential debate brought no real gaffes and little new information. Again, Obama was deemed the winner by public opinion polls.

The final presidential debate was McCain’s strongest performance but most people still thought Obama won. Joe the Plumber got his 15 minutes of fame but it wasn’t enough to help McCain.

Obama maintained a lead on McCain throughout the rest of the election. Obama also led in all the battleground states except Ohio and Missouri. Some states that hadn’t gone Democratic since the 1960s or 70s were close or trending Obama.

McCain needed a misstep by Obama (he made none) or a really strong debate performance that didn’t materialize to change the dynamics. The Obama campaign managed to tie McCain to the unpopular President Bush and his mishandling of the economy. Obama offered ‘change we can believe in’, withdrawal from Iraq, more emphasis on winning in Afghanistan, alternative energy, and improved health care.

McCain campaigned on being a maverick and distanced himself from Bush. He was largely unsuccessful in convincing voters of either. McCain had made some headway prior to the economic crisis on the issues of domestic oil drilling and withdrawal from Iraq without timetables, but the crisis and falling oil prices forced those issues off the table. He had also made some progress in accusing Obama of lacking experience in a series of highly negative ads, but it wasn’t enough.

Election Results and Analysis

At 11:00 EST, with California's voting results in, the networks declared Barack Obama the winner. Senator McCain immediately called to congratulate him and offered a very gracious concession speech. President-elect Obama's acceptance speech was held in Chicago's Grant Park to a huge crowd estimated at well over 100,000 people.

The Electoral College vote was 365 for Obama and 173 for McCain. Obama won Ohio and Florida as well as all the states Kerry won in 2004. In addition, he won traditionally Republican states like Indiana, North Carolina, and Virginia. The popular vote was 53 percent to 46 percent, the highest percentage won by a Democrat since 1964. Voter turnout was also high at 62 percent of eligible voters.

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