CHAPTER 11

The General Election

If Abraham Lincoln had run for president in 2012, his campaign manager would have said, "Cancel the torchlight parades and the wall posters, Abe. You need a Twitter feed. You need bloggers. You need Webmasters, database managers, bundlers, and pollsters. No offense, but image consultants will tell you to ditch the top hat! And don't forget lawyers: lots of lawyers." Campaigning, which is always evolving, has been changing at warp speed in recent years.

Until the mid-1900s, most campaigns were ***party centered***; party leaders planned and managed candidates' campaigns with the party's interests in mind, just as they do today in most other democracies. The state and local party organizations provided most of the money and volunteers used by candidates.

But a series of changes had occurred that would undermine parties' control over campaigns. Reformers pushed for greater use of primary elections. Because it is risky for a party to take sides in a primary, candidates had to create their own campaign organizations to compete for the party's nomination, which they tended to keep and expand after winning the primary. State and local parties were weakened by other reforms, ranging from civil service laws to nonpartisan elections, and their flow of volunteers dried up (see Chapter 3). New and effective technologies emerged that could be purchased by wealthy candidates as easily as by parties. Some public relations experts began to specialize in political consulting and provided the services—for a fee, of course—that the parties had provided for free (or at least for no monetary payment) in earlier years.

These changes freed candidates from having to depend on their parties for money, volunteers, and advice. Campaigns became more ***candidate centered,*** directed by the candidates and their staffs and consultants rather than the party organizations and focusing on the candidate's own needs, not the parties'. But just as they have throughout their long lives, the parties are adjusting to these changes. This chapter will look at the technologies, information sources, and means of persuasion that candidates now have available for their use and that contribute to the candidate centered nature of most campaigns. We will also explore the conditions in which party organizations have been able to reclaim an important role in at least some campaigns.

CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

The key factors in designing strategy for a general election campaign[1] differ in several respects from those in a primary. Campaigning in a primary election focuses mainly on the party electorate, especially in states with closed primaries (see Chapter 9). In contrast, the general election audience is much larger, more diverse, and has a longer time in which to observe the candidates. The general election campaign is also powerfully affected by whether the candidate's party is in the majority or the minority in that district (see box "Party Campaign Strategies in 2012 and 2016" on this page).

Party Campaign Strategies in 2012 and 2016

As the manager of a general election campaign, one of your first critical decisions will involve how much of your resources to devote to mobilizing your base—your core supporters—and how much to spend on appealing to independents and supporters of the other party. If you are running the campaign of the majority party's candidate in a district, you'll win if you can turn out enough of your majority, so you'll probably try to rally your base by stressing the party's core values. With more U.S. House districts "safe" for one party, the use of this "base strategy" has increased. If your party is in the minority or the race is competitive, then you need to promote aspects of your candidate's record or personality that attract independents and to raise issues that cross party lines.

In recent presidential campaigns, neither party has started with an assured majority. But it is still common that one party—typically, the party advantaged by national conditions at the time—is more likely to follow a "base" strategy and for the other party to focus more on independents and the other party's identifiers. In 2000, George W. Bush stressed that he was a "compassionate" conservative and emphasized bipartisanship and an end to "partisan bickering" in order to appeal to independents and Democrats. Democrat Al Gore, in contrast, stressed the traditional Democratic core issues of Social Security and Medicare to consolidate Democratic support.

When Bush ran for reelection in 2004, he chose a different approach. Although he continued to appeal to independents and weak Democrats by stressing his leadership in the war on terror, Bush's campaign put major effort into energizing its base. Believing that millions of conservative Christians had sat out the 2000 election, presidential adviser Karl Rove used issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion to mobilize these core Bush supporters. Democrat John Kerry's campaign, in contrast, worked to attract independents and weak Republicans by stressing Kerry's record as a Vietnam War hero.

Why did the two parties' campaigns switch strategies? In 2004, the Republicans put major effort into mobilizing their base because the party's sophisticated

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campaign apparatus had become better able to locate and turn out its core supporters. The polarization of the electorate and the decline in split ticket voting influenced strategists as well; if the center is shrinking, a centrist appeal makes less sense. The Republican strategy worked in 2004.

By 2008, however, Bush's approval ratings had dropped sharply. The drag of Bush's unpopularity and the economic recession meant that the Republican base was smaller and harder to mobilize. So the Republicans worked hard to appeal to independents, nominating a war hero and party maverick, Sen. John McCain. And the Democrats' ability to follow a "base strategy" was put at risk by their uncertainty about white, working-class Democrats' response to the first black presidential nominee in American history. Therefore, the Democrats not only used economic appeals to hold the base but also relied on Barack Obama's charismatic appeal to attract moderate suburbanites and independents.

If you were managing a presidential campaign in 2012, which approach would you take? If you're a Democrat, the state of the economy will affect your ability to rely on your base. If you are a Republican strategist, you must decide whether to broaden your appeal well beyond your conservative Christian base—and, if you do, whether you'll infuriate the base and weaken yourself further. If your strategy works, you'll be hailed as a genius, and your party's candidates for president in 2016 will seek your counsel. If it doesn't, expect frequent mentions by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

In both primary and general election campaigns, however, one of the best ways to win many offices is to already hold the office you seek.[2] Incumbents normally have greater name recognition and more success in attracting (usually favorable) media coverage than do their potential opponents. The constituent service provided by their government-paid staff members and their paid travel to and from the district give them a substantial edge over their challengers, unless they throw it away due to scandal. Their access to power makes it easier for incumbents to raise as much campaign money as they think they need, and their experience helps them use it effectively. Also, incumbents are usually part of the majority party in the district, which helps them win. Because of these advantages, in both types of elections, incumbents often need to do little more than to stress their experience, their trustworthiness, and the benefits they bring to the district, including the "earmarks" in the federal budget that help the district's economy.

Challengers face a much harsher campaign environment. Especially if they have not won any other political office before, challengers do not start with an experienced organization, proven fund-raising skills, or the other incumbent advantages.[3] In the days when party organizations ran campaigns, this might not have been a problem. At a time of candidate centered campaigns, it is. One obvious answer might be to purchase an experienced campaign organization by hiring political consultants, but most challengers do not have the money.

Thus, the predictable cycle begins: The challenger lacks an existing organization and enough money to attract the interest of well-known consultants and buy media time, so he or she cannot reach many voters, and without these vital resources, a challenger will not rise in the polls or raise enough money to be able to afford either one.

No matter how resource poor they are, however, challengers can raise issues. Thus, policy issues such as abortion, health care, and taxes are more important tools for challengers than they are for incumbents.[4] Researchers find that challengers usually do better when they campaign on issues "owned" by their party, such as health care and Social Security for Democrats and national defense and taxes for Republicans.[5] But even the most powerful issues won't do a challenger much good if he or she can't attract media coverage to publicize them.

Candidates for open seats (those where no incumbent is running) are more likely to run competitive races. Those who choose to run for the most visible offices—the presidency, governorships, the U.S. Senate—typically start with considerable name recognition, which increases because of the attention given to an open seat race. They can attract enough funds to pay for extensive media campaigns. Their major challenge will be to spend their money effectively and to define themselves to the voters before their opponent gets the chance to define them. John McCain's media consultants were trying to define their opponent in the summer of 2008 when they put up an ad calling Barack Obama "the biggest celebrity in the world" and comparing him to Paris Hilton, to suggest that he was a presumptuous empty suit rather than an experienced president-to-be. (Hilton responded with an ad referring to McCain as "the wrinkly, white-haired guy," another attempt at defining an opponent.)

HOW CAMPAIGNING HAS CHANGED

Candidates now have campaign tools available that would have been the envy of their counterparts decades ago. With the help of an expanding industry of professional consultants, campaigns have found effective ways to apply advances in polling, media use, and computer technology.

Professional Consultants

Political consultants deliver a variety of campaign services.[6] Some are general consultants, similar to the general contractors who oversee the construction of a home. Others focus on specialized tasks, such as the development of media messages, Web page design, or fund-raising. Many firms concentrate on polling; some provide the organizational skills needed to stage rallies, coffee parties, canvassing, and phone banks.

Professional consultants typically work for several different campaigns at a time, but they almost always work with clients from only one party. Some consultants restrict themselves even further to one wing, or ideological grouping, within the party. Although they function independently of the party

organization, they normally try to keep a cooperative relationship with that party's leaders, because national party committees often play a matchmaking role in bringing together consultants and candidates.

Sources of Information

Polls No campaign technology has been employed more fully than the public opinion poll.[7] Candidates poll before deciding to run for an office in order to assess voters' views and to probe for weaknesses in the opposition. When the campaign begins, polls are used to determine what issues are uppermost in voters' minds and how the candidate's first steps are affecting his or her "negatives" and "positives." Poll data can help the campaign decide whether its ads should emphasize party loyalties or ties with other party candidates. ***Tracking polls*** can follow the reactions of small samples of voters each day and measure immediate responses to a campaign event or a new ad.

Computers Experienced candidates develop a picture of their constituency in their minds. After years of contact with constituents, they sense what kinds of people support them and how they believe they can trigger that support again. In past years, this "theory" of the campaign would have guided the candidate's strategy, even if the beliefs were inaccurate or the constituency had changed.

Computer technology now provides a sophisticated check on the candidate's beliefs. By combining pollsters' and canvassers' findings in databases, it is possible to determine which types of people are most likely to be swayed by which types of appeals. Fund-raisers can merge mailing lists from groups and publications whose members may be predisposed to favor their candidate and then produce targeted mailings within hours. Using computerized records, "oppo" researchers can locate statements made by the opponent on any conceivable issue.

METHODS OF PERSUASION: THE AIR WAR

Because of the large size of most state and federal election districts, candidates (and national parties as well) make extensive use of the mass media, especially television, radio, and the Internet.

Television

Television consumes most of a typical campaign's budget. In the early and inexpensive days of TV, candidates bought large chunks of time to air entire speeches to a national or statewide audience. Now, because of TV's increased cost and voters' shorter attention spans, campaign messages are compressed into 30-second spot ads that can be run frequently.[8] In several close House races in 2010, for example, virtually every minute of advertising time in the weeks before Election Day was filled with campaign ads. Placement of these spot ads is a major concern of media specialists. If a candidate wants to

appeal to middle-aged men, for instance, then the specialist would run ads on programs such as *CSI* and *Monday Night Football.* The value of broadcast advertising has been reduced, however, by technology that viewers can use to screen out campaign ads, from the "mute" button to TiVo.

Cable TV is a cost-effective alternative to the traditional networks and works well in local campaigns, whose constituencies are too small to warrant buying time in major media markets. Most cable stations, such as TLC and CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network), have more specialized "niche" audiences than do the bigger networks. This permits campaigns to target their messages (called ***narrowcasting***).

Campaigns also try to get as much ***free media*** coverage as possible on TV and radio news and in newspapers. (Campaigners prefer to call it ***earned media.***) When newscasts and print reporters cover a candidate, the information may seem more credible and "objective" than if it is conveyed through the campaign's own ads.

To get free media coverage, campaigns need to provide material that meets the media's definition of "news."[9] If "news" is that which is dramatic, controversial, and immediate, then a candidate is not likely to earn media coverage with yet another reading of a standard stump speech. Dave Barry offers this illustration: "Let's consider two headlines. FIRST HEADLINE: 'Federal Reserve Board Ponders Reversal of Postponement of Deferral of Policy Reconsideration.' SECOND HEADLINE: 'Federal Reserve Board Caught in Motel with Underage Sheep.' Be honest, now. Which of these two stories would you read?"[10] Candidates who depend on free media need to stage campaign events that use the tamer, political equivalent of the underage sheep: dramatic confrontations, exciting settings, or meetings with well-known or telegenic people.

But the media's campaign coverage is all too brief. A study of seven major Midwestern cities during the 2006 campaign found that viewers were exposed to less than two minutes of election news during a typical 30-minute local newscast, most of it discussing strategy and polls, compared with four and a half minutes of paid political ads.[11] And for those Americans who have little or no interest in news, there are now enough other media choices to be able to avoid it altogether—a big change from the 1970s, when most Americans watched the same three network newscasts. The political information these news avoiders receive, then, comes entirely from campaign ads and entertainment programming.[12]

The Internet

First used by candidates in 1996, Web sites are now a part of every major campaign and many local races as well. Campaigns can reach their supporters directly on the Internet, thus bypassing the needs and biases of the broadcast media. Many Web sites ask visitors to register, which allows the campaign to contact them later via e-mail. By loading spots or longer ads online—on the free video-sharing site YouTube, for instance—campaigners can get their messages distributed nationally without paying for costly TV time. During the

2008 primary season alone, more than 1,000 videos about Barack Obama were posted on YouTube and viewed more than 53 million times.[13]

Ads on other Internet sites are another effective way to reach potential supporters. In 2010, both parties bought ads on Google, so that when someone entered a search term indicating his or her political sympathies (for instance, "Obama socialist"), a pop-up ad would appear featuring the party closest to those views. People clicking on the party's ad were directed to a page where they could donate to the party. By examining the "take," a party could measure which search terms brought the best results.

Not all voters have ready access to the Internet, but its use has expanded rapidly. More than twice as many people went online for campaign news (55 percent) in the 2008 election than in 2000. People under the age of 30 are most likely to be Internet users, not surprisingly, but older adults who use the Internet are almost as likely to watch political videos and share election news online as younger people are.[14]

In short, the broadcast media are an efficient way to reach large numbers of prospective voters. Their greatest strength, however—the breadth of their reach—is also one of their greatest weaknesses. (The other is their high cost.) If you were running for office, you would want to target different messages to different kinds of people so that you could speak to each individual about the issue that most concerns him or her.

Direct Contact by Mail, Text, and Twitter

Direct Mail By merging postal mail lists of people who are of special interest to a campaign, consultants can direct personalized letters to millions of people who might be inclined to respond to a particular appeal. A candidate who wants to appeal to pro-gun voters, for example, could send computer-generated letters to people on mailing lists of the National Rifle Association, donors to other pro-gun candidates, and subscribers to hunting magazines. Because these messages are designed to be read by like-minded individuals in the privacy of their homes, direct mail appeals can be highly emotional and inflammatory, appeals that would not work as well in the "cool" medium of television.

E-mail E-mail has the great advantage that it is cheaper than regular mail; fund-raising using e-mail and Web sites costs about one penny for each dollar raised, compared with about 40 cents per dollar raised by direct (postal) mail.[15] Online fund-raising, first used effectively by John McCain in 2000 and then Howard Dean in 2004, played a vital role in elevating Obama and Republican Mitt Romney to the status of serious presidential candidates in 2008.

Several groups and campaigns amassed huge e-mail lists in the 2008 campaign. The King Kong of these lists was the Obama campaign's, with more than 13 million e-mail addresses. Online contributions accounted for an estimated two-thirds of the candidate's record-breaking $750 million in contributions. The campaign sent more than 7,000 discrete messages to its e-mail list, for a total of over a billion e-mails. Many of the messages were

targeted specifically to certain groups—for instance, people who had already donated small sums to the campaign. The Republican National Committee and the liberal organization MoveOn.org also maintain extensive e-mail lists.

Text Messaging Because postal mail misses large numbers of young people whose addresses change from year to year, text messages have become an increasingly common method of turning out the vote.[16] In addition to Obama's mammoth e-mail list, his campaign collected a million cell phone numbers from people who had agreed to receive text messages from the campaign. Supporters received 5–20 texts a month, targeted to the individual's interests and locations. In battleground states on Election Day, every voter who had signed up for Obama texts got at least three such messages reminding him or her to vote and to bring others to the polls too.

Social Networking Sites ("Socnets") As of the 2010 election, 6 out of 10 American adults used social networking sites such as Facebook and 21 percent of online adults used these socnets to connect with a campaign or to follow or post about the election.[17] Many candidates maintain profiles on these sites to communicate with their supporters and others. By sending a campaign message on Facebook (or through e-mail, texting, or blogs) and urging each recipient to forward it to his or her already-existing network of contacts, the campaign can increase its reach exponentially at little or no cost. This ***viral marketing*** was used more often by Democrats in 2008, but Republicans caught up in 2010.

Twitter The 2008 election was the first in which Twitter, a free social networking site, received campaign use. Campaigners can send "tweets," messages of up to 140 characters, to update supporters. Tweets can be used to respond quickly to an opponent's attacks—or to distribute those attacks more widely.

THE GROUND WAR: "UNDER THE RADAR"

Campaigners have traditionally used more personalized appeals as well. These are known as the ***ground war***: house-to-house canvassing and phone calls that permit communication with selected groups of people. These ground-war techniques were used with great sophistication by Republican campaigns in 2004, and the 2008 Obama campaign organization surpassed even that standard for personal as well as online contact (see box "What Made Obama's 2008 Campaign So Effective?" on page 210).

Canvassing and Phone Banks

In the days of machine politics, party organizations sent their patronage workers and other volunteers to the homes of people who might vote for party candidates, to tell them about the party ticket. Although candidates' staffs now can tweet, call, and e-mail just as easily as party leaders can, canvassing does not lend itself

What Made Obama's 2008 Campaign So Effective?

The Obama campaign's strategy in 2008 was unusual for a presidential race. Most presidential campaigns have spent 70–75 percent of their funds on broadcast media advertising. The Obama campaign's media expenditure was less than 50 percent. Instead, the campaign's first priority was the ground war—the block-by-block, phone-by-phone effort to contact as many individuals as possible. "We knew that we had to get really good turnout," said Campaign Manager David Plouffe, "and we thought that a human being talking to a human being... is the most effective in communication." The Obama field operation was the most extensive in modern political history, far outmatching that of his Republican opponent, John McCain.

Another reason for Obama's success, according to Plouffe, was that the lengthy nomination race against the "formidable" and aggressive candidacy of Hillary Clinton toughened up the young Obama organization for its run against McCain. The long march of primaries and caucuses "made us a stronger general election candidate. A lot of our dirty laundry was aired, and we had practice in testing a campaign... we went into the general election in very much fighting shape." McCain's campaign, Plouffe said, "careened from message to message, strategy to strategy. We had one message, one strategy."

And, of course, the economic meltdown and Obama's calm response to it, the unpopularity of President Bush, and the excitement generated by the first African American major party nominee for president didn't hurt either.

Sources: Lloyd Grove, "World According to ... David Plouffe," at www.portfolio.com/views/columns/the-world-according-to/2008/12/11/David-Plouffe-Interview (accessed November 13, 2011); and Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 107.

as readily to candidate centered campaigns. It takes a lot of volunteers to go door to door, and for most of American history, party organizations were more likely than individual candidates to have the requisite numbers of canvassers.

Canvassing became less common from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, when party organizations had more difficulty finding volunteers. But since then, the parties have developed more sophisticated forms of canvassing to turn out their base voters and other targeted groups. Voter contacting by the parties has increased dramatically, especially in competitive contests.

Microtargeting If you knock on every door in a big city, you'll reach a lot of Democrats. Republican voters are not as concentrated geographically as Democrats tend to be. Thus, Republican strategists determined in the early 2000s that they would have to use more high-tech means to locate likely Republican voters. Using commercial databases, the Republicans collected data on millions of people's viewing habits, magazine subscriptions, buying preferences, and voting patterns. They entered these data into the national

Republican database called ***Voter Vault***. Analysis of the data showed that people who watch Fox News, country or religions stations or the Golf Channel, drive BMWs rather than Chevys, go to exercise clubs after work, drink bourbon or Coors beer, and watch college rather than pro football are more inclined to support Republicans.

With these data in hand, the Bush–Cheney campaign and the Republican National Committee, in coordination with Republican state and local parties, worked to cherry-pick likely Republican voters in the 2004 election. This is known as ***microtargeting*** or "niche marketing." They focused especially on 7 million likely Republicans and 10 million conservative-leaning independents who had not voted regularly in the past. Then they classified these targets into a series of types and determined which issues were the most likely to anger voters in each type. One voter type could be approached with a personal contact or a phone call dealing with same-sex marriage; another might receive an appeal about terrorism.

The success of the Republican effort led the national Democrats to ramp up their own program. In 2008 exit polls, a larger proportion (26 percent) of respondents said they were contacted personally by the Obama campaign than those reporting contact by McCain (18 percent).[18] The A.F.L.-C.I.O., the giant labor federation, contributed extensively to the Democrats' canvassing efforts in 2006, 2008, and again in 2010.

Contacting voters by phone is even quicker, though not as persuasive, as is "door-knocking." Many campaigns, then, bring supporters to a central location (a ***phone bank***) with telephones—often a business, union, or party or campaign headquarters, or even an empty building where volunteers can use their cell phones—to dial lists of numbers identified by the campaign's microtargeting. Even cheaper are virtual phone banks, where supporters anywhere in the nation go online to get a list of phone numbers and a script to read, and ***robocalls***, in which volunteers or computers can direct automated phone calls to large numbers of people on a campaign's target list. Robocalls are often used to send a negative message or to do ***push polling***—attack messages disguised as public opinion polls. In high-profile races, households may receive several of these calls a night as the election approaches. But these techniques have limits, too: Caller ID lets people screen their calls, and the growing number of cell phone–only individuals makes calling more costly.

Negative Campaigning

It has become a staple of political consulting that, when a candidate is falling behind in the polls, one of the quickest ways to recover is to "go negative." Attacking an opponent is not new; politicians since the earliest days of the republic have been hit with vicious attacks. Concern about negative campaigns has increased recently, however, because they can be spread so much faster and farther by new technologies.

Harsh negative ads often attract news coverage, which carries their message to even more people. Information about the savage ads of the "Swift Boat

Veterans for Truth" in the 2004 campaign, making the unsubstantiated claim that John Kerry had not deserved the medals he was awarded in the Vietnam War, reached between half and three-quarters of respondents in national surveys even though the ads were broadcast in only seven small media markets. The proportion of negative ads in the 2010 election was the highest in recent history.[19]

Does negative campaigning work? Much of the recent evidence suggests that it does. Negative ads can be particularly memorable and emotionally engaging. In some circumstances, that can increase voter information and turnout.[20] The timing of the ads matters; before an individual chooses a candidate, negative ads can be informative and useful, but after the individual has made his or her choice, attack ads are more likely to depress turnout, especially among people who are not strong partisans.[21] No matter what their real impact was, the Swift Boat ads were widely assumed to have seriously hurt Kerry's campaign in 2004, so presidential candidates in 2008 drew the lesson that they needed to respond immediately and strongly to negative ads, rather than to ignore them.

These campaign tools have been used in a variety of ways in recent elections.

The 2004 Campaign

Attention focused heavily on a few highly competitive campaigns in 2004. Because the two parties were so evenly matched in the U.S. House and Senate, and because the overwhelming majority of House incumbents were expected to coast to easy wins, the parties and many interest groups ignored most congressional races and focused their resources on two or three dozen competitive seats as well as the presidential race. In the presidential contest, the air wars were limited to between 12 and 20 "battleground" states at any given time. Residents in these targeted states were hit by a virtual hurricane of campaign ads. In contrast, voters in 8 of the 10 biggest media markets—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, San Francisco, Boston, Dallas, and Houston—saw no sustained advertising for either presidential candidate because their states were regarded as locked up for one candidate.

Although most campaigns continued to be candidate centered, there were signs of more party centered activity in these very competitive races. In particular, the national Republican Party geared up for an unprecedented ground war campaign. To counteract the expected canvassing drives by labor unions and the Democrats, the national Republicans had been conducting a series of experiments on how best to reach voters. They field-tested a program in 2002 in which the GOP flooded precincts in competitive states with Republican volunteers and paid staffers, especially during the last 72 hours of the campaign. This ***72-hour project*** was expensive, costing $200 million, but observers felt that it increased Republican turnout by about 3 percent in 2002 over that of the last midterm election, and Republicans won most of the close contests, maintained control of the House, and narrowly regained

control of the Senate.[22] As a result, the Republicans expanded the model in 2004. A full year before the election, the RNC and the Bush campaign were already training thousands of volunteers to recruit canvassers for a massive "72-hour project." Because the president was unopposed for the Republican nomination, the full force of his huge campaign budget could be focused on the general election.

The Kerry campaign and the national Democrats put effort into the ground war as well. But much of Kerry's canvassing and almost 40 percent of his TV advertising was done by independent groups, who raised money to help the Democratic ticket compete under the constraints of the 2002 campaign finance reforms (see Chapter 12). By law, these independent groups were not allowed to consult with the Kerry campaign in planning or conducting their activities, nor could they ask people directly to vote for Kerry; so their messages and efforts were not always closely integrated with those of the campaign.

In the end, the Bush volunteers had an easier sell. A large majority of Bush voters were enthusiastic about their candidate, whereas many Kerry voters were motivated mainly by their dislike of Bush. The Republican eked out a narrow victory, and his party kept control of the House and slightly increased its Senate majority.

Democrats Regain the Advantage in 2006

Republican candidates anticipated a much tougher race in 2006. The climate of public opinion had changed. Bush's approval rating was dropping markedly, in part because of growing public discontent with the war in Iraq. As anti-Republican feeling grew, more and more previously "safe" Republican incumbents started looking over their shoulders. Democrats soon gained other targets, including several Republican congressmen who were linked to a corrupt lobbyist and one who resigned after having sent sexually explicit e-mails to underage House pages. The number of competitive House races, estimated to be about 35–45 at the beginning of the 2006 campaign, soon expanded to more than twice that number.

Anti-immigration stands taken by some Republican conservatives further hurt Republican chances by undercutting the party's recent efforts to appeal to Latino voters. To compensate, Republican strategists decided to start the party's microtargeting and canvassing campaign sooner and to expand it to include a larger portion of independents. As its chances worsened, the national party spent more than 90 percent of its funds on negative ads attacking the Democrats. Democratic candidates responded by linking their Republican opponents to Bush.

On Election Day, Democrats rode a wave just as the Republicans had in 1994. With a net gain of 31 seats in the House and 6 in the Senate, Democrats took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 12 years. The Democratic trend, which was especially strong in the Northeast, was built on substantial support from moderates and independents as well as Democratic identifiers.

The Old and the New in 2008

Democratic strength continued to grow in 2008 as Bush's popularity hit new lows. By this time, as Chapter 4 showed, the DNC and several other Democratic-leaning groups had matched and perhaps even surpassed the Republicans' microtargeting skills. Using the DNC's upgraded Vote Builder databank as well as data from the privately owned Catalist, the Obama campaign designed an extensive ground game. In addition to this door-to-door canvassing, Obama's organization successfully used the Internet, text messaging, cell phones, and other electronic tools to contact voters.

Perhaps the most notable accomplishment of Obama's campaign was its ability to expand the playing field. Democratic presidential campaigns in the recent past had targeted a group of reliably Democratic East and West Coast states and then aimed to pick up just enough "battleground" states (typically, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida) to reach an Electoral College majority. Obama's staffers tried to create more alternative ways to win. They put particular effort into some previously Republican states, such as Colorado and Virginia, whose demographic profile was becoming more favorable to Democratic candidates.

Even so, it wasn't an easy race for the Democrat. In many ways, Republican John McCain was the Obama campaign's worst nightmare. As a self-proclaimed "maverick" and reformer, McCain was able to draw distinctions between himself and President Bush. McCain was a war hero, a longtime political presence in comparison with Obama's relative inexperience in national politics, and a personality attractive to independents. McCain's campaign sought to overcome Democratic trends by portraying Obama as an elitist who did not "share our values," similar to Bush's successful characterizations of Kerry in 2004 and Al Gore in 2000. Obama fought to keep the focus on the Bush administration's failures. Although the polls showed Obama with a slight lead during the summer of 2008, McCain pulled ahead after the Republican convention. But the financial disaster of mid-September, and McCain's unsteady response to it, broke McCain's new momentum and foreshadowed Obama's victory in November.

In the end, the Obama efforts paid off. Blacks and Latinos, women, city dwellers, upscale suburbanites, and liberals formed the core of Obama's victory. Obama won not only every state that Kerry had carried in 2004 but also nine former Bush states. Several states, including Virginia and Indiana, gave their electoral votes to a Democratic presidential candidate for the first time in 44 years. Republicans held their own in Appalachia and other areas with large white, evangelical populations and even improved their performance among whites in the Deep South. But Obama's victory and Democratic gains of 8 Senate seats and 21 in the House made 2008 another Democratic wave.

Backlash in 2010

After two back-to-back victories for the Democrats—an unusual occurrence for either party—the tide turned again. The main predictors of midterm losses by the president's party—low presidential approval ratings and a

bad economy—both pointed to major Democratic losses in 2010. President Obama's job approval ratings had slipped below 50 percent. And although a unified Democratic government had passed landmark legislation in 2009 and 2010, including health care reform and a major economic stimulus package to stem the runaway economic decline, these accomplishments did not produce a boost in the party's approval ratings. Instead, Republicans and many independents charged that Obama and the Democratic Congress were trying to engineer a government takeover of health care and other parts of the economy. Extensive coverage of bargaining on the health care bill made the process seem distasteful to many voters and triggered an energetic anti-Democratic protest by Tea Party activists.[23]

Democratic candidates were on the defensive for much of the 2010 campaign. Many of the Democrats elected in their party's wave elections of 2006 and 2008 had won districts and states that were normally Republican; these "exposed" incumbents were in danger when the partisan tide shifted. The national party was forced to use its resources to protect these vulnerable incumbents, whereas the national Republican committees were able to target powerful Democratic House members and senators as well as junior members.

The only real surprise was the magnitude of the Democratic losses. Even though Democratic campaign spending outpaced the GOP, Republicans gained a House majority by winning 66 seats while losing only three—the biggest gain by either party since 1948. The GOP also gained 6 Senate seats (but not majority control) and 6 governorships, plus more than 700 state legislative seats. That gave Republicans greater control over the redistricting of state legislative and congressional seats that took place in 2011. Democratic losses were especially heavy among moderates and those who supported the health care reform bill and the extension of President Bush's bank bailout.[24] The pattern of defeats left the Democratic congressional contingent more liberal, and the Republicans more conservative, than before. As always, however, the results were interpreted in different ways, depending in part on the agenda of the observer (see box "Why Did the Republicans Win in 2010?" on this page).

Within weeks of Election Day, the 2012 campaign had begun. Democrats attacked Republican candidates as extremists linked to the Tea Party. Republicans responded that the Democrats were a party "made in Washington." But although the charges were familiar, both sides knew that they would face a different electorate in 2012 than they had in 2010. Midterm voters are more likely to be white, older, and wealthier than are those in presidential elections. That was markedly true in 2010, when the midterm turnout was more conservative than usual, and independents, who had voted predominantly Democratic in 2008, swung heavily toward Republican candidates. If past patterns held, the 2012 electorate would be younger, more diverse, more weighted toward blacks and Latinos, and thus friendlier to Democrats. Every 2012 campaign's strategic choices would have to take these shifts into account.

Why Did the Republicans Win in 2010?

Many Republicans argued that voters had asked for change in 2008 but instead had gotten big government and big federal deficits. The voters, in this view, were protesting the Obama Administration's liberalism.

Many liberal Democrats contended that there hadn't been *enough* change. Democrats lost, they said, because the Obama administration and the congressional Democrats had been too moderate; therefore, disappointed liberals stayed home on Election Day. Democrats, they said, should have moved quickly to end the Bush tax cuts, push climate change legislation through Congress, and pull American troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Many moderate Democrats differed. It was the moderates who deserted the Democrats, they insisted, because the party had promised progress on economic issues but had instead spent too much time on policies important to liberals, such as health care reform.

It is common for different groups to interpret (or "spin") the meaning of an election differently, to support their own preferred views. Journalists, who are the targets of the spin, often become cynical about it. Jon Margolis, former national political reporter for the *Chicago Tribune,* claims that he switched to the sports beat because he said he'd never seen a sports story that read, "The Chicago Cubs defeated the St. Louis Cardinals today by a score of 2-1. The Cardinals denied it."

Sources: Margolis quoted in Ronald D. Elving, "Campaign Data Can Be Calculated Nonsense," *CQ Weekly*, August 19, 1995, p. 2602.

DO CAMPAIGNS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Because campaigns attract so much media attention, money, and effort, many people naturally assume that campaign events are responsible for the election's outcome. Yet careful statistical analysis shows that election results can often be predicted fairly well from conditions that existed before the campaign began, such as the incumbent's previous poll ratings, economic conditions, and the distribution of party loyalties in the district. That doesn't leave much room for campaigns to determine the outcome. Instead, it suggests that campaigns simply remind voters of these longer-lasting conditions and, in this way, help them move toward a largely preordained outcome.[25] Does this mean that the candidates' strategies are not important?

The Argument That Campaigns Matter

Some campaigns have clearly made or broken a candidate. In 2010, U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) looked very likely to lose reelection. He ran behind his Republican opponent, Sharron Angle, for months in the

polls. Yet Reid eked out a victory after Angle's campaign made a series of bad decisions. Her campaign manager never got around to hiring a political director and paid little attention to the campaign's budget and advertising. A national Republican operative referred to the "sheer, utter incompetence" of the manager: "If they were filming a sequel to the movie 'Dumb and Dumber,' [Angle's manager] would have a feature role."[26] Angle herself contributed a string of gaffes, including threatening to sue Reid for publicizing Angle's (controversial) stands on issues.

Other than sheer incompetence, what makes a difference in campaigns? A long line of evidence suggests that canvassing has a small but meaningful effect on both turnout and voters' choices.[27] Researchers find that door-to-door canvassing is more effective in activating voters than phone contact is, and both kinds of contact are more effective than mailings.[28] The quality of the contact can matter at least as much as the medium, however.[29] Canvassing probably makes more of a difference in local elections than in presidential races because there are fewer alternative sources of information in local contests. Where a party is active, its vote share can increase by at least a few percentage points, which could be the critical margin in a close race.[30]

As would be expected, television news and advertising—and the money that pays for the ads—can also influence voters' decisions.[31] The impact of TV ads is often short lived, however.[32] Campaign debates and other events make a difference in the election result under some circumstances.[33] All these sources of campaign information, taken together, can improve citizens' knowledge, influence their choices, and increase voter turnout.[34]

Various elements of campaigns affect some voters differently from others, depending on the voter's party identification and level of interest in politics. For instance, those with limited political interest may pick up only a little information about campaigns, but the few bits of information that break through—often, perceptions of a candidate's likeability—could have a big impact on their attitudes.[35] People who hold a weak party ID and who have had doubts about their party's candidate can be especially affected by the campaign communications they receive.[36] And the emphasis placed by media[37] and campaigns[38] on different aspects of the race or the candidate, such as the candidate's views on the economy or his or her age or ethnicity, can influence what the voters regard as important.

The Argument That They Don't

There are several reasons why campaigning may have only a limited effect. Television news, ads, and ground war activities offer viewers a wide range of conflicting messages about candidates—positive, negative, and neutral information and opinions, all mixed together. The inconsistency of these messages makes it harder for a campaign to have a single, consistent impact on viewers' minds.[39]

We know that voters pay selective attention to media and other campaign communications. They tend to surround themselves with friends, information,

and even personal experiences that support their beliefs and loyalties,[40] and they often ignore information that conflicts with their opinions. The media environment has become highly diversified in recent years, with blogs, newsletters, talk media, and cable channels presenting a dizzying array of perspectives.[41] As a result, it is not hard for people to find media outlets that reinforce their views: Think of Fox News for conservatives and *Daily Kos* for liberals. Most campaign messages, then, probably have the effect of activating and reinforcing the voter's existing political inclinations, as they always have.[42] That can explain why so much campaign effort is directed at getting people out to vote—to act on whatever opinions they already hold—rather than at trying to change their voting decision.

Some Tentative Answers

There is much left to learn about the effects of campaigns. In the information-rich environment of current politics and among the large numbers of weak partisans and independent "leaners," the potential for campaigns to shape voters' perceptions may be at least as great as it has ever been. The impact of campaigns, however, will continue to be limited by the same forces that have always constrained it: voters' tendency to pay attention to the messages with which they already agree and their ability to tune out most political messages altogether.

CANDIDATE CENTERED OR PARTY CENTERED CAMPAIGNS?

The campaign techniques that we have explored in this chapter have affected the balance of power in campaigns between parties and candidates. Broadcast media, which need a large audience, tend to focus on individual personalities rather than institutions such as parties. Tools such as Internet ads and TV advertising are available to any candidate who can pay for them; they let candidates communicate with voters without the party's help. The technologies that have developed since the mid-1900s, in short, have helped candidates run their campaigns independently of the party organizations. If the American parties had been as strong organizationally as those in many other nations when these technologies developed, then they might have been able to monopolize the use of TV and other media for campaign purposes. But in fact, as we have seen, the American parties have always struggled to maintain their power in a political culture hostile to their functioning.

Many of the nation's electoral rules also make it easier for campaigns to be candidate centered, though the other necessary conditions for such campaigns didn't come together until the 1960s.[43] The American electoral process has few institutions, such as parliamentary-cabinet government or proportional representation, which would encourage voters to see elections as contests between parties for control of government. Instead, rules ranging from campaign finance regulations to the separation of powers encourage

candidates to run as individuals, not as members of a party ticket, and make it hard for parties to coordinate the campaigns of several candidates. Progressive reforms strengthened this tendency. The direct primary, as we have seen, allows candidates to run without the party organization's approval.

Consequently, it is the candidates and their advisers, not the parties, who make the strategic decisions in most campaigns. Candidates have their own headquarters and staffers rather than using the party's facilities. Candidates maintain their own relationships with voters rather than relying on the party organization as an intermediary. Party organizations, rather than running campaigns, often work instead to enhance the appeal of individual candidates, and they compete with consultants, interest groups, and others for the chance to do so.

Party Influence in Competitive Campaigns

The parties, however, are fighting back. The large sums of money that have flowed into the national parties in the past three decades have helped them to assist individual campaigns with money and other services.[44] As Chapter 4 noted, soft money enabled party organizations to pour millions of dollars into campaign ads in a few battleground states until 2003. Since then, massive party fund-raising and voter contact drives have expanded the party presence in more races.

The national parties' visibility has grown especially in the most highly competitive Senate and House elections. That is where party organizations have used independent spending to make the biggest financial impact, in some cases spending even more than the candidates themselves do. But because independent spending does not allow the parties to coordinate their efforts with their candidates, much less to run their campaigns, party-funded ads have sometimes stressed different themes from those the campaign preferred to emphasize and, frequently, more negative messages than the campaign's own advertising.[45] Because voters rarely pay attention to the source of any particular message, candidates have gotten blamed for negativity and claims that they have not made. In most races, however, the party's role is not nearly as noticeable.

The Continuing Struggle Between Candidates and Party Organizations

An expanded party role in campaigns makes economic sense. Party organizations can distribute appeals for a number of candidates at the same time and register voters to help the entire ticket. Parties can buy media advertising and consultants' services for use by many candidates at cost-effective prices. Party organizations can coordinate Election Day activities for all the party's candidates, provide poll watchers to guard against voting irregularities, send cars to bring people to the polls, and check voter lists to mobilize nonvoters late in the day.

This efficiency is bought at the cost of limiting each candidate's independence, however. Party organizations and candidates do not always have the same goals. The party, aiming to maximize the number of races it wins, puts its scarce resources into the most competitive campaigns and spends as little as possible on the races it considers hopeless. Each candidate, in contrast, is committed above all to his or her own victory and to gaining the resources needed to achieve it, no matter how unlikely that victory may be. The party, in its drive to win every competitive race, is likely to do whatever it takes, whether through negative or positive campaigning. The candidate, in contrast, has to face the voters; a constant barrage of attack ads may make a candidate less appealing.

The result is a continuing struggle between the party organizations and the candidates—the party in government—for control of campaigns. In most elections, the candidates have won the fight. Although the parties have more to offer candidates than they did just a few years ago, party organizations still contribute only a fairly small percentage of candidates' overall spending in all but a few races. In contrast, European parties often provide more than half the funding used by most candidates.

Candidate centered campaigning has an important effect on governing. When they control their own campaigns, winning candidates can develop personal relationships with their constituents, unconstrained by party ties. Candidates are free to form close alliances with interest groups, which enhance the ability of these groups to influence public policy. In short, candidate centered campaigning strengthens the power of the party in government relative to that of the party organization. It also poses an important question: If strong party organizations can help to hold elected officials accountable for their actions, then how much accountability do voters get from a candidate centered politics?