

Making Voters Autonomous: The Possibility of Unmediated Political Campaigns
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Abstract: Technology makes possible a return to direct communication between candidates and voters. The results of a study carried out during the 2000 presidential election show that unmediated access to the candidates encourages voters to become politically engaged.

Media-based campaigns have clearly failed to engage the electorate. Few people find political campaigns interesting, voter turnout in presidential elections has stagnated at approximately fifty percent of the eligible electorate, and public evaluations of candidates, the press, and the political process itself are at an all-time low (Popkin and McDonald, 2000; Patterson, 2000; Cook et al., 2000). These symptoms are certainly troubling, given the premises of democratic governance.

1. Why Media Campaigns Fail

The disconnect between modern campaign communications and their intended audience of ordinary citizens can be traced to the professional culture of journalism, competitive market pressures, and the inherent conflict between candidates and reporters. Journalists, no longer content to provide mere descriptions of events and “facts,” resist candidates’ efforts to use them as mouthpieces for public relations exercises and seek instead to provide added value through professional interpretations of the motivations underlying the candidates’ statements and actions (Patterson, 1993). Rather than depicting the candidates as sincere agents of the political parties who are committed to implementing their platform pledges, news reports emphasize the scripted, and typically manipulative aspects of candidate behavior (Kerbel et al., 2000; Patterson, 2000). As carefully controlled studies demonstrate, however, this now-dominant interpretive news frame activates distrust of candidates and generalized cynicism about the political process (Cappella and Jamieson, 1995).

Compounding the built-in antagonism between candidates and the press, market pressures further disrupt voters’ ability to learn about the candidates. News organizations, responding to the need to attract

market share, gravitate to the more “entertaining” facets of the campaign and neglect systematic coverage of the candidates’ positions and track records. Instances of scandalous or unethical behavior weigh heavily in entertainment value, while more substantive information is deemed less newsworthy. The resulting swirl of charges and counter-charges creates an atmosphere that further discourages voters from becoming involved (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995).

One of the most striking symptoms of the pathology underlying contemporary media-based campaigns is the gradual disappearance of the candidates’ voices from daily news coverage of the campaign. By current standards, the candidates of the 1960s and 1970s could engage in relatively lengthy discourse -- averaging a minute a day of unmediated (uninterrupted) speech on network news (Hallin, 1992). The most recent tabulation found that the average daily sound bite for the 2000 campaign was a mere seven seconds (Hess, 2000). Today, the public is more than six times as likely to hear from pundits as from candidates (Media Monitor, 2000). In sum, media-based campaigns generate an excess of negative, non-substantive news coverage, and provide virtually no opportunities to encounter the candidates in their own voices. It is no wonder that voters are disengaged.

2. Renewing Unmediated Campaigns

Today’s information technology offers a promising avenue for a renewal of *direct* communications between candidates and voters. The key, of course, is to bypass the ongoing conflict between candidates and the media and the ensuing spiral of cynicism, while providing a means for voters to encounter the candidates in their own voices. Online sources (such as candidate and party websites) are now the most common form of direct voter-candidate interaction.

Nevertheless, despite their profusion, political websites have attracted relatively small audiences. One of the primary problems has been that political content on the web is far less appealing than non-political content. In addition, the multimedia content offered by candidate websites requires a level of technology (e.g. high speed data transmission capacity) unavailable to most voters. A potentially more

accessible form of direct interaction between candidates and voters is the portable “handbook” -- now cast in the form of a data storage device. A campaign handbook -- which is a more elegant and interesting counterpart to the traditional direct mail campaign -- delivers the same multimedia content and richness of coverage as a political website, but is likely to reach a wider audience. To put a CD into one’s home or office computer requires neither sophisticated hardware nor a fast Internet connection -- and certainly CD usage does not demand a level of interest or commitment comparable to that of the political news “junkie” who is willing to spend time comparing various political websites. And from a scholar’s point of view, the CD/direct mail approach is especially advantageous because it permits a relatively unobtrusive and non-reactive method of observing voter use of campaign information. (CD usage, for instance, can be tracked with considerable precision.)

3. The Stanford CD Project

The 2000 election provided the first opportunity to test the potential of direct campaign communication in a presidential election. Through the generous support of the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Political Communication Laboratory at Stanford University produced an extensive and easily accessible election database, which was distributed free of cost to any voter who requested it. Compiled as a multimedia CD, the database included text of the two major candidates’ campaign speeches (delivered between July 1 and October 7), video of the televised ads aired by the candidates and their respective parties, and the texts of the party platforms. The CD also included the soundtracks and transcripts of the nomination acceptance speeches and the first presidential debate. In total, the CD amounted to over 600 pages of text and three hours of multimedia. In order to distribute the CD to voters in advance of the election, speeches, ads and debates occurring after our “publication” date (October 8) were provided on a companion website in the same format as presented in the CD.¹

¹ There were approximately 80 speeches and 52 televised ads on the CD. After Oct. 8, the date on which the CDs were “burned,” the candidates released ten additional ads and eight speeches.

The CD was designed so that voters could easily interact with the candidates. The CD was presented in the form of a book, with topical, issue-oriented chapters (e.g., foreign policy; the economy). Each chapter provided an opening guide to its contents so that users could get directly and immediately to the material of greatest interest. The software also enabled users to scan the database selectively, applying their own criteria as a basis for comparing the candidates.

Over 30,000 voters (representing all 50 states) requested a copy of the CD.² The CD was also distributed to some 2,000 educational and civic organizations across the country. In addition to the civic objective of providing voters with unmediated information, the intervention provided a unique opportunity for assessing the specific effects of increased voter autonomy from the news media.

4. Research Design and Principal Findings

We expected that “user control” -- voters’ ability to retrieve and examine the candidates’ positions on issues of particular interest to them -- would simultaneously increase their interest in the campaign and rekindle public enthusiasm for campaigns and the electoral process. We anticipated that direct access to the candidates in their own words would be an empowering experience and that use of the CD would encourage voters to approach rather than avoid the campaign.

The experiment consisted of two treatments that corresponded to mediated and unmediated campaign information and a post-treatment survey of political attitudes. Participants assigned to the unmediated condition received the CD that we had prepared, which contained candidate materials, but which was devoid of media reports. The parallel stimulus in the mediated condition was another CD (identical in appearance and user interface), which presented a collection of typical print, radio, and television news reports on the presidential campaign, but was largely devoid of direct candidate materials. The two CDs were calibrated to be roughly equivalent in terms of length, ratio of multimedia to text content, and amount of coverage aimed at the two main candidates.

The CDs produced for study subjects were programmed to enable “user tracking.” Each time the CD was accessed, the user’s computer activated a log of the pages visited and the amount of time each page remained on the screen.³ Study participants received their CDs on October 23, 2000, two weeks in advance of the election. They were informed that the CD was an educational product of Stanford University, which sought feedback on user experience and reactions. Subjects were then given instructions concerning use of the CD and the procedure for returning the usage tracking data.⁴

Each treatment consisted of a nationwide, representative sample of approximately 550 adults (for details on the sampling frame, see InterSurvey, 2000). Two hundred thirty and 205 participants returned the CD usage data for the campaign and media conditions respectively. Because we were interested in differentiating the effects of exposure to the CD from actual CD use, we arranged to re-contact and survey those participants who did not return the CD tracking data. (Our questions were added to other, non-political surveys being taken by these same respondents within a month of the original CD study.)⁵

The design also called for two separate control groups. The first was a representative sample of adults with Internet access (N=350). The second was a broader sample of all voting-age adults (N=300). The former is the appropriate baseline for people who actually ordered the CD (which required access to our web store at Yahoo.com). The latter provides a useful baseline for assessing the potential effects of CD use on the broader electorate. In fact, the two control groups did not differ significantly on any of the criterion measures of interest, and for purposes of the analyses reported below they were pooled.

² Our marketing efforts included advertisements run in *USA Today*, and banner ads in a major election-related website (voter.com). The CD was also featured in several popular shopping websites.

³ Of course, study participants were fully informed of this feature.

⁴ “The ebook will self-install once you put the CD into your PC. Feel free to browse or scan the CD at your own pace and convenience (and as many times as you like). Each time you use the CD, the pages and topics you looked at are recorded on a tracking file. Immediately after the election (November 7th), we will contact you with instructions on how to send us this file. We will also send you a brief questionnaire. You will be paid \$10.00 for your participation.”

⁵ Stated more technically, this aspect of the design allows us to address an important issue in experimental design, namely, the presence of selection bias in exposure to the treatment (see Angrist et al., 1994 for a recent discussion).

The level of CD use proved equivalent in the two conditions. On average, participants registered between two and three CD sessions. The average number of page views was 204 in the candidate CD condition and 181 in the media CD condition. Exposure to either CD treatment powerfully strengthened voter turnout and perception of the self as politically influential (efficacy).⁶ In both cases, however, the effect was stronger in the case of exposure to unmediated information. In keeping with expectations, the media and candidate CDs had diverging effects on voters' sense of trust.⁷ Exposure to the candidate CD had no effect on the level of trust, but subjects exposed to the media CD were significantly more cynical in their views of elected officials. This result is in keeping with previous research; modern "critical" journalism depicts candidates as manipulative and insincere; consumers of election news become appropriately cynical about politics (Cappella and Jamieson, 1995; Patterson, 2000).

Table 1
Effects of CD Exposure and Use on Turnout, Political Efficacy, and Trust in Politicians

	Control Group	Media CD/ Exposure	Cand. CD/ Exposure	Media CD/Use	Cand. CD/ Use
Turnout	.77 (642)	.83** (496)	.85** (523)	.89** (207)	.90** (226)
Sense of Efficacy	2.79 (639)	2.99** (423)	3.02** (451)	3.02** (194)	3.11** (223)
Trust in Politicians	1.83 (620)	1.69** (425)	1.79 (450)	1.66** (196)	1.82 (222)

**p < .01

Overall, exposure to both mediated and unmediated campaign information facilitated voter engagement. Access to either CD boosted turnout and efficacy substantially. These findings suggest that

⁶ The index of efficacy consisted of three items to which respondents could agree or disagree: (i) Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on; (ii) Public officials don't care much what people like me think; (iii) People like me have no say about what the government does.

⁷ We used three items to measure trust in politicians: (i) In your opinion, how many of the people running the government are crooked? (ii) How much tax money do you think the people in government waste? (iii) How often would you say candidates running for Congress and the presidency make promises they have no intention of keeping?

information costs are a major barrier to public involvement in campaigns; providing voters with a costless and user-controlled source of information goes a long way to making campaigns more engaging.

The evidence in Table 1 further demonstrates that the effects of CD use on political attitudes exceed the effects of mere exposure. As noted previously, the “exposed” group includes participants for whom the level of actual CD use is unknown. It is in the more precisely targeted user group that the effects are most pronounced. In the case of the candidate CD, for example, turnout gains were 13 points for CD users, and 8 points for those who were sent the CD. The gains in political efficacy were similarly eroded when treatment is defined in terms of CD exposure. Finally, the cynicism-inducing effects of the media CD followed the same trend -- the decrease in trust was greater among subjects who actually used the CD.

5. Discussion

Alternative forms of campaigning in which voters and candidates bypass the news media have the potential to attract larger numbers of voters. Unlike exposure to news coverage, hearing directly from the candidates does not encourage a cynical mindset towards those who run for public office. Direct communication engages voters and furthers the candidates’ self-interest by reaching a broad audience for a fraction of the cost required to run ad campaigns in major media markets. (Both presidential campaigns cooperated fully in the Stanford-Pew project by providing us with their speeches and advertisements.) Bypassing the media is advantageous to voters and candidates alike. As strategic actors, candidates can be expected to take advantage of this new mode of direct campaigning by addressing a more complete range of policy issues that can be conveyed in a media-based campaign. In the end, voter autonomy, the breadth of policy issues under consideration, and candidate control over their message are better realized. These private gains, significant in themselves, may ultimately be overshadowed by the collective benefit of having a more enthusiastic and engaged citizenry.

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