

***Why Campaigns Matter: Perceptions, Decisions, and Outcomes in Presidential Elections***  
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**Rationale and Scope**

This book challenges the conventional academic wisdom that campaigns are largely inconsequential. I examine the impact of American presidential campaigns from 1980 to 2000, and find that campaigns have important and often decisive roles in determining electoral outcomes. Where previous work holds that aggregate results and individual votes are predictable in advance, I show that for each election a range of outcomes is possible. I then develop and implement a counterfactual approach to measuring campaign effects. I argue that campaigns affect outcomes if alternative campaigns would have led to different outcomes, and I demonstrate that campaigns do indeed have such effects.

To accomplish this I rely on statistical analysis of pre-election survey data from the National Election Studies. I begin by constructing individual-level models to explain changing perceptions of candidates and changing decision-making over the course of a campaign. In addition to their roles in demonstrating that campaigns matter, these models also reveal a variety of interesting and previously unexplored findings. I find that a changing mix of information shapes individual perceptions over the course of the campaign. In addition, I show that there is a clear theoretical and empirical link between changing levels of uncertainty about candidates and changes in individual decision-making.

I then develop a technique for counterfactual analysis of campaign effects, and use the results from these models of perceptions and decisions to make inferences

about the competitive balance of each campaign and the importance of campaigns for election outcomes. I find that in the majority of recent elections the losing candidate had an excellent chance of victory, which did not come to fruition due to the influence of the campaign. My results show that for each election there is a range of possible outcomes, including the possibility of a different winner, and that the campaign is critical for determining the actual outcome.

Throughout, the book provides fresh insights into the context of presidential campaigns, and the messages and strategies of the candidates. Candidates' personal traits, rather than ideology or issue positions, are the most decisive campaign influences. Also, outcomes are primarily determined by changing decision-making rather than by changing perceptions. Overall, these findings enable a more detailed and accurate analysis of the impact of campaigns, and a clearer statement about the magnitude and nature of their influence, than has previously been presented.

## Other Books on the Subject

One important argument of my book is that research on election forecasting has significantly understated the effects of campaigns on electoral outcomes, and overstated the extent to which outcomes are predictable in advance. There have been several recent works in the forecasting genre, including Fair's (2002) *Predicting Presidential Elections and Other Things*, Campbell and Garand's (ed. 2000) *Before The Vote*, and Campbell's (2000) *The American Campaign*. A related work, Holbrook's (1996) *Do Campaigns Matter?*, finds that campaign events affect pre-election poll results but that these changes tend to align the outcome with pre-election forecasts. My work stands in contrast to these, concluding that alternative research design and data analysis will reveal previously elusive effects of campaigns.

While other books on presidential campaigns and elections overlap with some specific pieces of my argument, none share its scope or its ultimate aim of showing that presidential campaigns matter for electoral outcomes. Studies of political communication include Crigler and Just's (1996) edited volume *Crosstalk* on media effects in the 1992 election, and Jamieson's (1996) *Packaging the Presidency*, a history of candidate advertising and strategy from 1952 to 1992. My focus is broader, going beyond the messages sent by candidates and received by voters to models of perceptions, decisions, and outcomes over the course of the campaign. In *Information and Elections*, Alvarez (1998) shows that uncertainty affects individual decisions in presidential elections. While my book also considers the effects of uncertainty on individual decision-making, this is only a part of the argument, and I go on to demonstrate that the observed effects are relevant for the outcome of the election. The

book thus provides a unified framework for examining various effects that have heretofore been considered separately.

The clearest demonstrations of the importance of campaigns are found in studies of elections other than presidential general elections. Two older books are enduring classics in the field. Bartels' (1988) *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice* explores the evolution of presidential nominating campaigns, examining both the individual-level processes underlying the observed results and the effects of the nominating campaigns on outcomes. Popkin's (1994) *The Reasoning Voter*, focusing mostly on primary elections, shows that voters are able to learn about candidates during campaigns. In a more recent work, *Campaign Dynamics: The Race for Governor*, Carsey (2000) demonstrates the importance of gubernatorial campaigns by showing that the campaign strategies of the candidates can influence voters' decision-making. These books are similar in spirit to mine, though I pursue different research strategies and empirical models. Overall, my work shares their rigorous substantive and methodological analysis of campaigns, and introduces such analysis to the previously unexplored territory of presidential general election campaigns.

In sum, while there are some existing books that are related to the book proposed here, no other work shares its topic, scope, approach, or emphasis. With an innovative research design, rigorous data analysis, and novel findings, this book will occupy a unique place in the scholarship on presidential campaigns and elections.

## **Table of Contents and Chapter Descriptions**

### **Chapter 1. *On the Trail of the Campaign***

I begin by recounting previous findings, at various levels of analysis, about the unimportance of American presidential campaigns. Scholars often employ forecasting models to argue that aggregate results can be predicted accurately using measures of economic and other national conditions measured before the fall campaign, meaning that the campaign itself has little impact. Even studies documenting campaign-induced movement in pre-election polls find that these changes largely serve to bring outcomes into alignment with pre-election forecasts. Finally, at the individual level, the “minimal effects” argument is that campaigns almost exclusively activate or reinforce pre-campaign preferences. Once again, this predictability is taken to be a sign that campaigns do not exert any significant influence.

I show that claims about the predictability of election outcomes, at both the aggregate and individual level, are overdrawn. Instead, for each election a wide range of outcomes is possible, with significant potential for the campaign to affect the election’s result. I then argue that demonstrating the effects of campaigns on election outcomes requires a counterfactual approach. Counterfactual reasoning is appropriate because the validity of a causal statement about how campaigns affect outcomes will depend on the extent to which alternative campaigns would have led to different outcomes.

## **Chapter 2. *The Evolution of Individual Perceptions***

In this chapter I examine individual perceptions of candidates on various choice dimensions, including liberal-conservative ideology, issue positions and personal traits. These perceptions are critical because individuals use them, in combination with their own preferences, when making electoral choices. I argue that individuals learn by observing the candidates directly and through the mass media, with two additional information sources introducing distortions. There is a projection effect, where perceptions of specific positions depend on overall evaluations of a candidate, and a knowledge effect, by which individuals who lack political knowledge tend to have more centrist views of candidates. I show that all of these effects can be combined into a single statistical model, allowing measurement of changes in perceptions and their determinants over the course of each campaign.

## **Chapter 3. *Perceptions and Uncertainty***

One important feature of perceptions is that they are generally not known with certainty. Instead, uncertainty arises when an individual perceives a candidate's position as a range of possible values with different probabilities attached. This can happen because candidates are ambiguous, or because individuals are not fully informed. In this chapter I model the dynamics of uncertainty over time during each campaign. I show that uncertainty can decrease, but also may increase as time passes. These changes are attributable to changing perceptions, as well as changing levels of information, over the course of the campaign.

#### **Chapter 4. *The Evolution of Individual Decisions***

Perceptions of candidates cannot influence electoral outcomes by themselves. Even the most dramatic change in a candidate's position will not have any effect if it occurs on a choice dimension that is not salient for individuals' electoral decision-making. Further, even if perceptions remain constant, changing salience can enhance or harm a candidate's electoral prospects. This chapter examines changes in the salience of various choice factors over time within each campaign. I find clear evidence of such changes within each campaign, with substantive effects that are large and important. I also demonstrate that the direction and magnitude of these changes varies across campaigns, in ways that are attributable to the influence of the campaign.

#### **Chapter 5. *Uncertainty and Salience***

In this chapter I show that it is the changing uncertainty observed in chapter three that induces the changes in salience found in chapter four. The notion that individuals make decisions differently depending on their level of uncertainty has been expressed intuitively, and demonstrated empirically, in previous research. In this chapter I develop an individual-level behavioral explanation for this phenomenon. In the presence of uncertainty, individuals can improve their utility estimates by giving more weight to factors that are more certain. I also show that this effect can be observed over the course of each campaign, as changes in uncertainty over time affect changes in salience.

## **Chapter 6. *Counterfactuals and Campaigns***

To demonstrate that campaigns affect elections, it is necessary to show that the changes in perceptions and salience described in previous chapters have significant effects on election outcomes. This is fundamentally a counterfactual argument. That is, to say that the campaign affected the outcome, it is necessary to show that alternative campaigns would have led to different outcomes. In this chapter I develop and implement a method for conducting such a counterfactual analysis. The intuition is that embedded within each campaign is a set of plausible alternative campaign scenarios. By examining the range of perceptions and salience over time, it is possible to infer how different campaigns would have affected voters' perceptions and decisions. These changes generate distributions of alternative outcomes, allowing me to evaluate the impact of the campaign on the observed election outcome.

I find that three of the last six elections (1980, 1988, and 1992) were heavily imbalanced in favor of the winner, with the losing candidates having excellent chances to win. The remaining elections are a mixed bag. Not surprisingly given the closeness of the result, the 2000 campaign was decisive for the outcome. Mondale in 1984 and Dole in 1996 had only slim chances of victory, though Mondale maximized his performance while Dole did not. Overall, the counterfactual method allows me to identify the impact of the campaign on the relative performance of the candidates, and the importance of the campaign in determining the election's outcome.

### **Chapter 7. *The Determinants of Electoral Outcomes, 1980-2000***

Chapter six demonstrated that campaigns matter for outcomes, and in chapter seven I show just how they matter. The counterfactual procedure developed in the previous chapter is quite flexible, and can be applied to any set of dimensions and any combination of perceptions and salience. Where the previous chapter applied the technique to measure the total effects of campaigns on outcomes, in this chapter I conduct a more detailed analysis of the effects of specific choice factors. I find that in each campaign the competence and integrity of the candidates, as well as individuals' emotional responses to the candidates, were the dominant factors in determining the election's outcome. Further, changes in salience had much larger effects on outcomes than changes in perceptions.

### **Chapter 8. *Campaigns and Elections, 1980-2000***

In this chapter I discuss campaign strategies and election outcomes in light of the results from previous chapters. The counterfactual results of chapters six and seven, and the results on perceptions, uncertainty decisions from previous chapters, provide a novel perspective on campaigns and elections from 1980-2000. This analysis is combined with contemporary reports from the mass media, as well as post-election statements by campaign managers and others, to generate a richly detailed narrative of campaigns and their effects.

## **Chapter 9. Conclusion**

The final chapter lays out the significance of the argument and findings of the book. I also offer suggestions for research design in dynamic electoral contexts, and ideas for studying the effects of political campaigns more generally.

### **Intended Audience**

This book will be of interest to scholars and others interested in the fields of elections, voting behavior, political communication, and the presidency. One indicator of the size of this audience is the fact that the “Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior” is the fifth largest of APSA’s thirty-five organized sections. Further, the size of this group is exceeded by the combined membership of the “Political Communication” and “Presidency Research Group” sections. These figures indicate that the sub-fields devoted to the book’s topics are a significant segment of the discipline of political science.

Within political science presidential campaigns and elections receive a great deal of scholarly attention both before and after each election. In addition to the published work described above and other research, recent election cycles have seen roundtables at conferences presenting forecasts of upcoming elections, with journal symposia about the performance of these forecasts after the election. Given the prominence of election forecasting models, a book that refutes the main findings of this literature is likely to receive significant notice. And with the nearly constant interest in presidential

campaigns, a book that catalogs their effects and demonstrates their relevance will be an important contribution to scholarship in this area.

The book will also be accessible to a variety of audiences. The basic modeling strategies will be familiar to readers who are accustomed to the use of survey data for understanding electoral behavior. The modeling innovations, including the use of cubic splines for modeling dynamic processes and heteroskedastic regression for understanding differences in uncertainty across individuals, are developed clearly and carefully. Some of the more technical material appears in appendices. Whenever I employ quantitative methods I explain the intuition behind the techniques and show how they fit the research design, and when discussing my findings I not only present the statistics but also use prose and figures to explain the substantive importance of the results.

Overall, the book will be appropriate for, and appealing to, a diverse audience. Its new findings about the effects of campaigns will be of interest to the large number of scholars and others who follow, or contribute to, research in elections, voting behavior, political communication, and the presidency. It would certainly be appropriate for graduate courses in these fields, and also for some specialized and advanced undergraduate courses as well. The elements of its research design, particularly the development and application of models for measuring changing effects over time and the use of statistical results for counterfactual reasoning, will make it attractive to scholars interested in the use of research methods in political science.

## **About the Author**

I received my Ph.D. from the University of Rochester in 1997, specializing in American politics and quantitative methods. I have conducted research on turnout in presidential elections, political tolerance, and legislative behavior in the US Congress. My published work includes articles in leading field and sub-field journals like *American Journal of Political Science*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Public Choice* and *Political Analysis*, along with a primer on multivariate statistical methods. In my work I employ a range of quantitative methods, from popular techniques like linear regression to advanced maximum likelihood models, and I have developed new statistical techniques for studying participation and choice. I am currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and the Lab for Social Research at the University of Notre Dame.