

THE U.S. 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION¹

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Political scientist David Paletz makes sense of the 2012 election in a cogent essay that examines the election context, campaign strategies, and the involvement of the media.

He examines three contexts that have influenced this campaign. These include Obama's 2008 win and subsequent failure to meet high expectations to turn around the economy. The voting situation, especially turnout, is the third contextual factor. Young people and minorities who turned out for Obama in 2008 are now among those most likely to stay home from the polls.

Campaigns develop their strategies based on information and data from their polls and focus groups. Party identification, candidate's image, and issues all factor into campaign strategy. Paletz also identifies four different ways in which the media are involved in campaigns based on how much control candidates have over the content of the communication.

Paletz concludes that this election is far from certain. As Election Day nears, his salient and insightful analysis of the context, strategies, and media involved in campaigns are valuable for anyone seeking to understand this election cycle.

Introduction

My ambition in this essay is to enable its readers to make sense of what is happening and will take place in the 2012 U.S. presidential election until Americans vote, and perhaps thereafter. I discuss the following subjects: the election context, campaign strategies, involvement of the media, and end with a brief conclusion. Omitted or slighted subjects are campaign organi-

zation, personal campaigning, and new technology.

Context

Elections and campaigns take place in a context that influences the results. This context includes who won the previous presidential election and why; the circumstances and what Machiavelli called "Fortuna;" the myth of the president as a dynamic figure responsible for the state of the country; and the voting situation—that is who is able and who is likely to vote in the 2012 election.

Who won the previous presidential election and why

We start with how Obama became president in 2008. Certainly, his campaign was more effectively run, made more adroit use of the media (including new technology), and was far better funded than his opponent's: he received 760 million dollars to John McCain's 383 million dollars. Observers of political campaigns in the U.S. know well the aphorism that money is "The Mother's Milk of Politics." In 2012, funding is reversed: the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, and supporting organizations such as Super PACs are receiving the most money.

In 2008, Obama also benefitted from favorable circumstances and enjoyed "Fortuna." After almost eight years in office, the incumbent president, George W. Bush, in October 2008 had an approval rating of 25 percent—a record low. With billions of dollars spent, the Bush administration's war on Iraq (which Obama had opposed), and no weapons of mass destruction discovered in Iraq, Bush was increasingly depicted by the media and viewed by the public, except for die-hard Republicans, as a disaster. The U.S. economy was in dire shape with the collapse of the housing and stock markets, bank failures, and soaring unemployment.

His opponent, Senator McCain, added to Obama's "Fortuna" by selecting Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his vice presidential running mate. While she rallied the Republican base, over the course of the campaign doubts about her qualifications arose among undecided and independent voters. Her selection was increasingly considered a blunder.

Obama also benefitted from the televised debates with his opponent. They enabled him to display sufficient knowledge about domestic and foreign af-

fairs to reassure many viewers of his competence and ability to serve as president.

Yet Obama only received 52.9 percent of the popular vote. Race was an important reason. Studies put Obama's vote to be five percent lower than expected because of racial prejudice. Although he won the states, he lost the white vote in Florida, Indiana, Maryland, North Carolina, New Jersey, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

The myth of the president

The second contextual factor is the myth perpetuated by the media in movies and television series such as "The West Wing" of the president as bold, decisive, active; as responsible for his country's condition, especially its economy, and for fixing its problems. Obama accentuated, even exacerbated, this myth in his 2008 campaign. He aroused expectation of a presidency of dramatic change exemplified with his slogan of "yes we can."

In reality, presidents are constrained, their powers limited—especially in domestic affairs. Moreover, during Obama's presidency, he made health care—not jobs and housing—his top priority. The economy did improve but not enough, and unemployment has persisted at an official rate of around eight percent.

Worse for Obama, once Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in the 2010 election, policy stalemate, even gridlock and acrimony, prevailed in Washington, DC.

So Obama's presidency has been characterized by disappointment resulting from high, albeit unjustified, expectations, and limited accomplishments.

The Voting Situation

The third and final contextual factor is voting. Turnout is important. Eighteen to twenty-nine year olds are usually around eleven percent of the electorate. In 2008, however, they increased to eighteen percent and voted more than two to one for Obama. However, the brunt of the economic recession has been borne by those who supported President Obama the most: the young and minorities, largely Blacks and Hispanics. They are now among the most disinclined to vote in 2012.

In addition, since the 2008 presidential election, the legislatures of thirty states controlled by Republicans passed restrictions making it more difficult to vote. For example, requiring people to show government issued identification such as their driver's license. Ostensibly intended to prevent "voter fraud," these requirements discourage minorities and the poor, most of them Democrats, from voting. However, the courts in several states did not uphold or delayed implementation of these laws.

Strategy

Presidential campaigns (and most campaigns that can afford the expense) base their strategy on information derived from their polls and focus groups. If not, they "fly without the benefit of radar." To the extent possible, this research identifies the candidates' supporters, opponents, and the undecided; what people know, do not know, and how they feel about candidates; the policy issues that concern people; and their voting intentions.

Armed with this information, and supplemented with data from tracking polls that measure shifts in public opinion responding to election events and media coverage, campaigns strive to develop the most effective appeals to voters. The purpose is to retain or gain votes for the candidate and discourage people from voting for the opponent. This strategy is developed around three subjects.

Party Identification

The first subject is party identification (known as the brand). Candidates appeal to people who identify with their party. But party allegiance is weakening and winning independents and wavering or disaffected voters from the other party is increasingly necessary for winning the presidency. Besides, most voters know the candidates' party affiliation, so candidates do not need to emphasize it. Instead, they have compelling reasons to play it down lest it discourages supporters of the other party and deters independents from voting for them.

Candidate's Image

The candidate's image is the second subject of campaign strategy. This story or narrative consists of

information and impressions conveyed about a candidate's background, leadership skills, character, style, personal life, and likeability.

Campaigns try to emphasize the candidate's favorable aspects and actions, define problematic ones positively, and play down or conceal the negative.

Achieving this effect can be complicated because some, if not most, of a candidate's behavior and decisions can be interpreted and depicted more or less positively or negatively, particularly through the words used or not used to describe them. In 2012, based on his business background and experience (at Bain Capital, in particular), Republican candidate Mitt Romney could be described positively as smart, disciplined, pragmatic, cautious, and a job creator; or negatively as slick, detached, reactionary, calculating, and a job destroyer. Obama obviously and understandably emphasized the negative. He criticized Romney for concealing overseas bank accounts (in the Cayman Islands and Switzerland) and for refusing to release his pre-2010 tax returns.

The ability effectively to define the candidate positively and the opponent negatively depends in part on the public's existing opinions about them. Absent or weak impressions are easiest to influence. In May 2012, 33 percent of voters had no opinion of Romney and thus were vulnerable to depictions of him by the Obama campaign. In July, 41 percent of people polled thought that Romney cared not much or not at all about the needs and problems of people like themselves. The figure was 36 percent for Obama. Such negative impressions can be hard to change even by the cleverest campaign messages. They can, however, be altered by effective or inept debates performances.

Issues

Issues are the third objects of strategy. Candidates like to focus on a few issues that favor or can be construed to favor them. For example, on foreign policy, Obama could claim credit for the death of Osama Bin Laden, ending the Iraq War, helping Libyans remove their dictator (without involving U.S. troops), and for gradually getting U.S. forces out of Afghanistan. Romney could point to the continued nuclear threats from Iran and North Korea or the failure to defeat the Taliban

in Afghanistan, as Obama failures.

There are some issues so obvious and important that campaigns must respond to them. Candidates present their side as positively as possible and attack the opponent. In 2012, it is the economy. If the election is decided by people's appraisal of Obama's job of running the economy, he will lose.

Obama argues that without his actions the economy would be much worse and that more regulation of business is necessary to protect the public. He attacks Romney for wanting to return to the economic policies that had harmed the economy and for favoring the rich. Romney accuses the president of making the economy worse, of burdening people and businesses with unnecessary regulations, and of "building a European-style welfare state." He derides the president's signature domestic policy accomplishment, "The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act," colloquially referred to, especially by its opponents, as "Obamacare," and says that, if elected, he will repeal most of it.

The Media

The media are involved in election campaigns in four different but overlapping ways depending on how much control candidates have over their contents. I call these "media-originated," "mostly-mediated," "partly-mediated," and "unmediated."

Media-Originated

Campaigns have no control over media-originated contents. In newspapers these consist of editorials, endorsements urging readers to vote for a candidate, and of opinion essays by columnists. Television has comedy shows, notably "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," "The Colbert Report," and "Real Time with Bill Maher," that are far more critical of Republicans than Democrats. Two television cable channels are avowedly partisan: Fox News (owned by Rupert Murdoch) features conservative commentators such as Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly and MSNBC features liberals such as Rachel Maddow and Chris Matthews. Rabidly partisan are the hosts of talk radio, notably Rush Limbaugh, who reach many millions of listeners with their commentaries and opinions.

Mostly Mediated

Journalists decide what to report about the campaign, the candidates, and the issues. I call this “mostly mediated” because the candidates and their aides try, sometimes successfully, to shape news coverage. Given the 24 hours news cycle, this is not always easy.

Campaign managers, press secretaries, and media consultants are in constant contact with journalists. Their tactics include dominating the news agenda with issues that favor them, framing news stories in their favor, staging events (by selecting locations, backdrops, crowds), and providing photo opportunities (photo ops). They promote the campaign’s message of the day, stay on (repeat) that message, and devise slogans (samples from Romney are “Believe in America,” “Obama Isn’t Working” and “Obama has Failed America”). Candidates speak in pithy sentences (sound bites) to make it easier for their statements to be shown on television and harder for them to be distorted or taken out of context. Indeed, campaign figures sometimes demand (and are granted) the right to approve their quotes that reporters want to use in their stories.

Eventually, it is reporters and editors who decide on the news. That is why candidates refer to the news media as “The Beast.” Journalists have their own criteria of news, which often differ from the candidates’. They do cover the candidates’ major speeches and important issues. But, they focus relentlessly (and excessively) on the horse race (who is leading, who is losing), as measured by polls data, campaign strategy, and conflict and controversy. They look for and delight in reporting campaign scandals, blunders, and goofs (for example, Romney having a car elevator installed in one of his homes).

Partly Mediated

In “partly mediated” candidates have greater control over media contents and can sometimes speak directly to the public. But control depends on the appearance format and the presence or not of other participants. Briefly discussed are nominating conventions, television talk shows, and candidate debates.

Nominating conventions present an ideal opportunity for a candidate to be celebrated and to communicate directly with a large audience, mainly of

partisans and supporters. Conventions would be coronations were it not for the fact that they are transmitted and reported by the media who, following news criteria, infuse their coverage with conflict and controversy, thereby diminishing, at least in part, the celebration.

Candidates go on television talk shows hosted by Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jimmy Fallon, and others. This enables them to display and humanize themselves by chatting with the host, defuse jokes made about them (often by the host in the past), and communicate with a television audience they might otherwise not reach.

Assuming they are held, their number and timing, debates between the candidates could determine the presidential election result. Debates can be so important that the candidates’ representatives negotiate extensively over how many (if any) will be held and their format: who will be the moderator, the questioning journalists (if any), the length of answers allowed, height of podium, and camera positions. These decisions are not trivial: in the 1960 debates, Richard Nixon’s image of strength was undermined by camera cut-aways showing him sweating and wiping his face while John Kennedy was speaking.

In 2012, the debates would provide the opportunity for Obama and Romney to make their cases, respond to questions, and challenge each other in front of a television audience of untold millions, some of them undecided or persuadable about whom to vote for.

Candidates are judged not just by their answers to questions but also evaluated by viewers and coached by advisors on their emotional expressiveness, aggressiveness, quick wit, speaking range, facial expressions, gestures, and body posture (they are instructed to lean forward). They use rhetoric they have rehearsed and speak lines designed to elicit approval from viewers and (if permitted) applause from the audience.

Debate “spinning” takes place in an effort to influence media coverage and public reactions. Before a debate each side plays down expectations for its candidates and raises expectations for the opponent. After the debate each side usually claims that its candidate was the winner. Media accounts of the debates usually focus on winning-losing and influence public reactions.

Unmediated

By “unmediated,” I mean that the campaigns control and pay for the contents and placement of their messages, which are transmitted uninterrupted. Political advertisements, usually running around thirty seconds, are by far the most common of such messages, accounting for around two-thirds of all campaign expenditures. They do one or more of the following: present the candidate positively, respond to the other candidate’s campaign (and its ads), and attack the opponent.

Because becoming president requires winning enough states to obtain a majority of the votes of the electoral college, ads are predominantly shown in states where the contest is close, the battleground “swing states” of Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

The ads can appear on national and local television, radio, the Internet, and on mobile devices like tablets and cell-phones. They may, however, be reported, commented on and assessed by journalists and others.

The ads are directed at general or specific audiences (the Food Network for Democrats, the Weather Channel for Republicans). More sophisticatedly, they can be micro-targeted, aimed at people based on where they live, the Web sites they visit, their voting records, and other characteristics and preferences.

The ads are artfully designed and tested against data derived from focus groups and polls. They use a panoply of visual and sound techniques. Examples are color (blue reassures, red threatens), camera movement (going left disturbs, right comforts), voice over (female can sound much meaner than a male voice), music (upbeat equals high energy), electronically changing and blending images (morphing), and using footage from television news to convey credibility.

The most controversial political advertisements are negative—they attack the opponent. Attack ads go back a long way in American politics. A newspaper editorial warned Americans that if Thomas Jefferson was elected, “murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced.”

For critics, attack ads are “the crack cocaine of politics.” Proponents call them “political multivitamins,” arguing that they provide information otherwise

absent from the campaign.

Political advertisements, especially when they attack, can influence voters. They are particularly effective when their message is credible, they feature memorable visuals, are shown early in a campaign thereby defining an opponent whose record is not known, and when they are not immediately rebutted. The Republican primaries of 2012 provided dramatic examples: each time one of Romney’s challengers for the Republican nomination won a primary or achieved a high rating in the polls, his campaign overwhelmed them with negative ads.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s *Citizens’ United v. Federal Elections Commission* (2010) decision significantly increased the importance and influence of political ads.² The court’s 5-4 ruling led to the creation of Super PACs (Political Action Committees). These are unaffiliated and unaccountable organizations that can receive unlimited contributions from corporations, unions, and individuals and use the funds to make independent expenditures in support of or in opposition to candidates. In some cases they are able to keep secret the names of the donors.

These organizations, often with innocuous and resonant names such as American Crossroads and Americans for Prosperity, will spend many millions of dollars mostly on political ads in 2012.

Here are three examples of different types of ads. Click on the images to view the ads on YouTube.

Santorum: Obama’s America

This is an attack ad. It was put out by the Rick Santorum campaign during the Republican primaries. Its form is that of a trailer (coming soon) for a horror movie entitled “Welcome to Obamaville.” It portrays the president as a diabolical force who has wreaked disaster on the country. Its visuals flash past, but some of them are memorable (a gas pump pointed to a person’s head suggests suicide). Its sound is menacing (a clock ticking ever faster), as the ad builds to a powerful climax. Full of emotion, arousing fear and even trauma, the ad may be unbelievable to a neutral observer (the Norwegians to whom I showed it). But it is intended for Republicans, many of them hostile to Obama, in order to convince them that they should select Santorum as their party’s candidate best able to attack and defeat the president.

Romney: Saved My Daughter



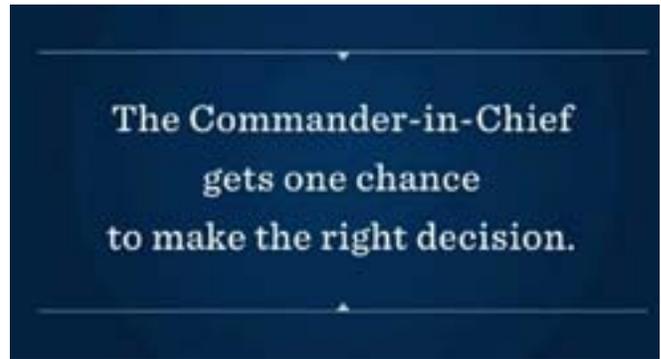
This is a positive ad designed to convince voters that Romney is a caring, heroic leader who puts people above profit. Its format consists of the emotional testimony of a man who tells us that when his daughter disappeared “my business partner [Romney] stepped forward to take charge” and said, “I don’t care how long it takes we’re gonna find her.” (The man’s voice catches just before he says “her”). Continuing his voice-over narration, the man frames Romney as a decisive, almost military, figure, saying, “he set up a command center” and “Mitt’s done a lot of things that people say are nearly impossible.”

Over the course of the ad the music goes from a minor to a major key and a police siren in the background conveys the danger of the situation. The ad ends

with a visual of Romney looking down—making him look like a savior. We are led to conclude that Romney, devoted to family values and a dynamic leader, will fix America’s problems just as he saved the narrator’s daughter.

One way to critique and challenge a political advertisement is to devise a counter-frame; to look differently at information the ad includes and adds information it omits. For example, the daughter was so unhappy with her repressive Mormon parents that she went to a “rave” in New York City and stayed away for a few days; Romney helped look for her but his search failed; he did not save her. A young man in New Jersey found her and called the police who returned her to her family. Our reframed ad, in which public service triumphs over ineffectual private enterprise, reverses the message of the Romney ad.

Obama: Osama Bin Laden



Our third advertisement is positive. It celebrates President Obama for displaying the qualities of decisiveness and wise judgment in giving the order, successfully executed, for U.S. forces to kill Osama Bin Laden. But the ad also attacks Romney (shown and heard in an interview with well-known journalist Wolf Blitzer) for lacking these qualities so essential in a president.

Made in a documentary style, the ad is narrated on camera by Bill Clinton. Who better to testify for Obama (using such phrases as “he reasoned” and “he took the hardest”) than the popular, credible ex-president who knows the burden of the office? Images show Obama, thoughtful and reflective, looking out of his White House office window. We see “Bin Laden is

Dead” with a backdrop of New York firemen celebrating. The sound of a heartbeat (Bin Laden?) ticking gets louder during the ad.

In criticizing the ad for “politicizing” a national triumph, Republicans skipped over President George W. Bush’s appearance in a flight suit in front of a “Mission Accomplished” sign on a U.S. aircraft carrier in 2003 during the Iraq war.

Conclusion

Prediction is problematic in elections. Revelations and surprises are not unknown. Unexpected events occur. Who could have anticipated the emergence of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street? Anything can happen anytime in politics. I am willing to predict that the 2012 presidential campaign will be brutal and ugly; that billions of dollars will be spent, most on a tsunami of political advertisements, many of them negative; and that President Obama’s re-election is uncertain

Endnotes

1. This essay is a revised version of a lecture given at the Litteraturhuset in Oslo on May 21, 2012. My appreciation to Aslak Sira Myhre and Silje Riise Naess for inviting me.
2. Citizens’ United v. Federal Elections Commission, 558 U.S. 50 (2010).

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