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The Political Psychology of Electoral Campaigns: Introduction to the Symposium

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The foundation of virtually all conceptions of democratic government is the occurrence of free and fair elections, together with citizens' participation in the electoral process. Elections serve as the mechanism through which the populace chooses their representatives. As such, they serve as the key linkage between the governed and their governors. How elections actually occur—that is, who participates, what voters know, and who wins—depends in fundamental ways on candidates' campaigns. Understanding the conduct and impact of electoral campaigns is thus fundamental to political science.

This symposium brings together six young scholars who demonstrate the unique contributions of political psychology to the study of electoral campaigns and participation. The impetus for the symposium comes from the methodological and substantive transformation that has taken place in the study and understanding of campaigns (e.g., Iyengar & Simon, 2000).[1] For example, over the past 15 years, scholars have moved beyond abstract spatial modeling and cross-sectional voter surveys toward content analyses and experimental techniques. Even more important, researchers have begun to incorporate a more sophisticated psychological portrait of voters and candidates. Historically, most work on campaigns assumed either that voters and candidates are rational actors with exogenously defined transitive preferences, or that voters interpret campaign information on the basis of their prior attitudes and/or tune out most campaign information as a result of selective exposure and attention. As Lodge, Stroh, and Wahlke (1990) put it, these approaches amount to "black-box models because they are silent about the processes that drive their explanations" (p. 13). Until recently, scholars paid little attention to how voters actually process information or make

[1] We focus on campaign strategy, the effect of campaigns on voters, and decisions to participate in the electoral process, rather than on the institutional rules that govern campaigns.

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decisions. The past 15 years have seen an opening of the black box, and the result has been a major advance in what we know about campaigns.

To cite just a few examples: Lodge and his colleagues introduced the on-line processing model (e.g., Hastie & Park, 1986) to voting research (see also Rahn, Krosnick, & Breuning, 1994). In sharp contrast to prior work, this model suggests that voters may have clear reasons for their votes and may be substantially affected by a campaign, even if they are unable to recite reasons for their votes or remember any campaign information. The reason is that voters keep a running evaluation of candidates; when they receive new information, they update their evaluations and then often forget the specific information because it is no longer needed. Thus, voters are able to retrieve the overall evaluation (which has been influenced by the campaigns), but not the information on which the evaluation is based.

The political psychological approach to studying when and how campaign information affects voters has also made a substantial contribution to the study of campaign strategy, particularly candidate rhetoric. For example, scholars have recently recognized that a major part of campaigning involves the emphasis or priming of different issues.[2] Because we know that voters' decisions depend on what issues are primed or how issues are framed (e.g., Druckman, 2001; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Johnston, Blais, Brady, & Crete, 1992), we also know that a critical part of campaign strategy concerns which issues to prime and how to frame issues (Jacobs & Shapiro, 1994; Petrocik, 1996). This has greatly advanced our understanding of campaign rhetoric. Not long ago, Riker (1996) stated, "we have very little knowledge about the rhetorical content of campaigns, which is, however, their principal feature" (p. 4). The political psychological approach—with its focus on issue emphasis—has changed this state of affairs. Perhaps somewhat ironically, Riker himself has been part of this transformation with his examination of what he calls heresthetics, which is, in essence, political priming.

Taken together, this recent research revises what we know about how campaigns affect voters. We have moved from viewing campaigns as having a minimal effect on voters to seeing them as events that can fundamentally alter election outcomes—events that warrant investigation in their own right. Moreover, we also have learned that traditional techniques for studying campaigns (such as surveys that ask citizens to explain their vote choices) are not adequate to understanding the fundamental processes by which campaigns are influential.

An additional area of research on electoral campaigns that has begun to receive attention from political psychologists deals with what motivates people to become active participants in the campaign process—as voters, financial contributors to campaigns, campaign volunteers, members of interest groups, and the like. Whereas past models of participation focused on ability as the primary

[2] It may be more appropriate to say scholars have "re-recognized" this, given that Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) made this point in one of their more psychologically oriented discussions.

determinant of participation (e.g., whether one has the requisite resources or civic skills to participate, or whether one has been actively recruited to participate; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), more recent research has focused on the psychological motivators of participation. For example, Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) pointed to the emotions evoked by candidates and their campaigns as an important determinant of whether people will participate in the electoral process. And Miller, Krosnick, Holbrook, and Lowe (2002) showed that the motivation to avert a policy change threat is a powerful predictor of participation.

In short, there is little doubt that the political psychology of campaigns is a fertile area for research. The past 15 years have seen this approach make major contributions to our understanding of campaigns and their effects. This means that scholars trained over the past 10 years or so have entered a field that looks quite different than it did 15 or 20 years ago. To these researchers, the political psychological approach might be seen as foundational rather than as a novel alternative to more conventional approaches. The six contributors to this symposium are part of this new generation of scholars. The collective aim of the symposium is to demonstrate the power of a political psychological approach to studying electoral campaigns. Three of the contributors focus on political participation; the other three focus on campaigns and/or the effects of campaigns on voters.

The first contribution comes from Joanne Miller and Jon Krosnick, who study the effects of two motivations on political participation: the desire to avert a threat of an unwanted policy change, and the desire to take advantage of an opportunity to obtain a wanted policy change. Miller and Krosnick's work addresses the dearth of motivational analyses in the political participation literature by pitting threats and opportunities against one another in an experiment that manipulates the type of appeal (threat, opportunity, or control) and measures two forms of political activity—making a financial contribution to an interest group and expressing one's views to the president. They find that threats are more likely to motivate financial contributions, but opportunities are more likely to motivate direct attitude expression. Their findings show that any theory of political activity is incomplete without careful consideration of citizens' motivations.

Jake Bowers addresses the causal impact of residential mobility on campaign activity. As the United States has become a "nation of movers," it is critical to understand the impact of such a pervasive phenomenon not only on voter turnout but also on other campaign activities. Bowers explains that the conventional wisdom that mobility decreases participation is based largely on correlational data. Using time series data that trace two generations over 18 years, Bowers shows that moving does in fact disrupt some forms of campaign activity for some people. However, the pattern of these effects belies a simple explanation of a single mechanism. Bowers' research demonstrates the importance of examining political participation as a dynamic process, and how doing so can provide insight into not only *who* participates, but *when* they participate.

Paul Martin addresses one of the most heated ongoing debates in political science—that is, the debate over how negative campaigns affect political participation. The evidence to date is mixed, with some showing that negative campaigns mobilize voters, others showing demobilization, and yet others finding no effects. Surprisingly absent from most existing work, however, is a thorough consideration of how voters process the information contained in negative campaigns—instead, most extant research black-boxes voters' psychology. Martin remedies this by positing three psychological processes that mediate the impact of negative campaigns/advertisements. Specifically, he argues that negative advertisements affect voters' republican duty, perceptions of candidate threat, and the perceived closeness of the election, in ways that lead negative advertisements to mobilize voters. He combines data on political advertisements and political behavior to show that negative advertising does in fact increase republican duty, anxiety about candidates, and perceived electoral closeness, and these factors in turn lead to increased participation. Martin's research constitutes a striking example of how a political psychological approach can greatly enhance our understanding of an important political process.

As mentioned, the other three contributors focus on campaigns and their effects. Jennifer Jerit shows how theories of campaign strategy and rhetoric depend in critical ways on an understanding of how voters process information. She introduces a novel model of campaign rhetoric, positing that the success of a given piece of rhetoric can be judged by how long it endures through the course of the campaign—more effective rhetoric endures longer. A consideration of voter psychology leads Jerit to predict that successful campaigns will continually use emotionally laden appeals to fear, anxiety, and anger. These types of appeals enhance a candidate's connection to the electorate, draw voters' attention, and coincide with the media's preference for drama and excitement. Jerit also recognizes, however, that candidates who propose major policy changes will rely relatively less on appeals to negative emotions, because such appeals do less to build the credibility necessary to propose change. Using a comprehensive content analysis of the 1988 Canadian federal election, Jerit offers convincing evidence that, as predicted, rhetoric likely to provoke negative emotions endured the longest and was used to a lesser extent by politicians advocating policy change. In the end, Jerit not only highlights elements of effective campaigns, but also offers a general approach to studying campaign rhetoric that we suspect will fundamentally shape how future researchers study campaigns.

James Druckman builds on the burgeoning literature on campaign effects. As mentioned, recent political psychological work suggests that campaigns might influence voters through issue priming—that is, by emphasizing an issue, the campaign leads voters to base their vote choices on that issue. Druckman points out, however, that extant research uses simulated rather than actual campaign rhetoric, and/or relies on indirect measures of voting. He overcomes these limitations by combining a content analysis of media coverage of the 2000 U.S. Senate

campaign in Minnesota with an Election Day exit poll. He offers clear evidence that a real-world campaign did in fact prime attentive voters. Druckman also extends priming research in two ways: He shows that, in addition to issue priming, the campaign primed the candidate images on which voters based their decisions, and he explores the interactive effects of campaign priming and interpersonal discussions.

Finally, David Redlawsk addresses the important issue of *how* citizens learn about political candidates. He explores the cognitive strategies citizens use to deal with the complex barrage of information they receive during a political campaign, and whether different strategies have different effects on overall candidate evaluations. Using a unique "process-tracing" experimental procedure, Redlawsk examines the impact of the difficulty of the information environment on the decision rules citizens use to determine what, and how much, information to consider when evaluating political candidates. Redlawsk finds that the complexity of the information environment does in fact affect the decision rules citizens use (the how of decision-making), and that the choice of decision rule has implications for candidate evaluations (the what of decision-making). Redlawsk shows that an examination of *how* citizens learn about candidates, not only *what* they learn, is fundamentally important to our understanding of the vote choices citizens ultimately make.

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