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Partisans or independents? Evidence for campaign targets from elite interviews in Spain

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Abstract

The study of campaigns has generally focused on a search for effects at the mass level, but little research has explored the behavior of those who actually attempt to influence voters. This essay reports findings from interviews carried out with elites in Spain, an institutionally and culturally diverse country that offers a unique environment for looking at party strategies. Three important findings emerge from the interviews: (1) all campaigns rely on a combination of mobilizing partisans and chasing after non-aligned voters; (2) when appealing to voters, parties prefer to emphasize their advantaged issues; and (3) Spanish elites question the existence of an ideological center. Together these points lend support to issue ownership or saliency theories of campaigns.
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1. Introduction

Do political elites design election campaigns to mobilize core supporters or appeal to deliberating independents? While the study of campaign effects at the mass level has a long and distinguished history (Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), surprisingly little research exists that explores electioneering tactics from the perspective of campaign planners. Through interviews with elites in one particularly diverse European democracy—Spain—this paper seeks to shed some

light on the electoral strategies party leaders develop in the weeks and months preceding the vote.

The paper will make three arguments about electioneering practices in Spain. First, mobilizing core supporters is a fundamental element of campaigns for all Spanish parties, but elites also respond to circumstances that necessitate appealing to voters beyond the base. Second, when forced to discuss policy, parties are more likely to emphasize their strength issues than to directly confront each other on the same set of issues. Third, elites struggle to define the political center. Despite the ubiquity of references to centrism in popular and scholarly accounts of elections, party leaders and MPs generally see politics according to identifiable groups with ideological predispositions.

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The paper makes two contributions to campaign studies. First, it enriches the currently underdeveloped comparative literature on electioneering. Previous cross-national work has focused on the structure of campaign committees and other organizational issues rather than the fundamental topic of campaign targets and messages (Bowler and Farrell, 1992; Butler and Ranney, 1992). This essay inquires directly into the origins and substance of appeals that are potentially consequential for election outcomes. Second, the paper takes a new methodological approach to old questions about the etiology of party behavior. Previous scholarship has generally either assumed the motivations of elites (Downs, 1957) or tried to infer party strategies inductively through the empirical examination of campaign statements (Budge et al., 1987). The approach adopted here is to go straight to those responsible for making crucial strategic decisions and inquire directly about their motivations, goals, and techniques.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on campaigns and derives hypotheses to be tested against the interviews. The subsequent section describes the sample of respondents and introduces the context of Spanish politics. The interviews are then discussed in depth. A final section discusses implications of the findings beyond Spain.

2. Election campaigns

Kitschelt (1989) describes a continuum of party behavior that ranges from a logic of constituency representation, emphasizing policy purity, to a logic of party competition, emphasizing vote maximization. Rohrschneider (2002) proposes a related continuum applicable to campaigns that ranges from purely mobilizing appeals, directed towards a party's base, to purely chasing strategies, directed towards non-partisans. This paper combines the language of both authors and searches for the circumstances that promote a logic of mobilization and those that promote a logic of chase.

The logic of mobilization has its grounds in the extensive history of election studies in the USA, as well as in the literature on voter alignments in Europe. The commonality across both sets of literature has been the repeated finding of substantial continuity and predictability in the voting behavior of mass publics. The seminal publication, carried out by a group of scholars associated with Columbia University, was based on a panel study of potential voters in Erie County, Ohio during the 1940 US presidential campaign (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). The study's

provocative conclusion was that the election campaign had very little effect on most citizens. In fact, it was found that most voter behavior could be determined quite accurately based on a small number of demographic variables measured before the campaign had even begun. Furthermore, those who wavered most in the months before the election were the people *least* interested in politics. These findings of widespread political naiveté, highly predictable voting patterns, and minimal campaign effects were replicated eight years later with a panel from Elmira, New York (Berelson et al., 1954).

Whereas the Columbia authors described the sociological roots of voting behavior, a group of researchers at the University of Michigan developed the highly influential concept of partisan identification. In *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), the Michigan scholars described how citizens develop psychological attachments to a particular party in the same way individuals come to feel connected with a church or fraternal organization. These long-term attachments were found to serve as important heuristics for voters because, even more than the Columbia studies, the Michigan authors found substantial political ignorance among the masses.

Predictable voting patterns have not just been limited to the United States. The literature on economic, religious, and regional cleavages in Europe also uncovered a great deal of stability in party support (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). In all, electoral research from the middle twentieth century showed, in a variety of contexts, substantial inertia in citizens' vote choices from one election to the next. In such a setting, election campaigns functioned to crystallize the latent preferences of pre-aligned voters and to mobilize inveterate party supporters to turn out on election day (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Finkel, 1993).

The logic of chase is grounded in the spatial theory of elections (Downs, 1957). In its most basic formulation, the theory assumes that voters are distributed along a single ideological dimension and predicts that parties will offer policy packages which will maximize votes according to the shape of voter preferences. Over time, spatial theorists have incorporated more and more realistic assumptions into their models. Yet a core assumption remains unchanged: at a given point in time a voter's proximity to a party in an n-dimensional space fundamentally drives vote choice (Enelow and Hinich, 1990).

Historically, the predictions deduced from spatial models—most famously that two-party competition leads to ideological convergence—have lacked