Responsive elections: The effect of public opinion on political campaigns

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A B S T R A C T

Political campaigns exist so that electoral candidates and parties can pursue votes, but what explains their content? It is clear that a lot of thought (and a lot more money) go into election campaigns, but the issues political actors focus on and those that they avoid are not well understood. In this paper we consider the responsiveness of the 2009 German Federal election campaigns to public priorities expressed through the "most important problem" survey question. Through the use of time series models of daily media reports of campaigns and rolling cross-section survey data on the attitudes of individual voters we find evidence that the 2009 German Federal election campaigns were responsive to public priorities and the attention of opponent campaigns. However, the focus of the campaign on the party or an individual candidate led to more and less responsiveness respectively. These results suggest that political campaigns dynamically respond to public opinion and each other, but that the nature of the campaign can lead to drastic changes in the level of responsiveness exhibited.

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1. Introduction

Election campaigns are finite and time dependent venues for incumbents and hopefuls alike to express their platforms for the purpose of achieving electoral success (Downs, 1957). It is this limited amount of time and space that forces campaigns, like so many other political agendas, to prioritize by paying varying amounts of attention to all the different issues that are a focus of the party and the election cycle (Jones, 1994; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005a; 2005b). While the ideal may be campaigns that advertise a party's manifesto or that respond to the issues of highest prominence the reality lays somewhere in the middle. Clearly campaigns put forth the party's agenda, but they also respond to events, the public and the actions of other parties (Schmitt-Beck and Pfetsch, 1994; Sulkin, 2005). The abundance of information from the media, political parties, the public and other actors furthers the need to prioritize and the need to depend on heuristics in order to attend and process this information in a timely and efficient manner. After all, electoral campaigns like people and other political institutions are only able to focus on a limited number of issues (Simon, 1971; Jones, 1994). Despite the prevalence of using polling data in the study of elections the effect of public priorities on election campaigns is an understudied element of the electoral process. Its importance to understanding politics cannot be understated though, not only should the degree of responsiveness help explain the effectiveness of campaigns, but the degree of responsiveness to public priorities speaks to representation at a far earlier stage of the political process than how it is normally considered through thermostatic (Wlezien, 1995; Soroka and Wlezien, 2005) and other models of opinion responsiveness (Jones et al., 2009; Bevan and Jennings, 2014). We ask how responsive are election campaigns to public priorities? While the role that political campaigns and even manifestos have in policy outcomes is less than a 1 to 1 relationship (e.g. Bara, 2005) as is any form of agenda implementation (e.g. Bevan et al., 2011; Lovett et al., 2015) these mechanisms play a central role in our understanding of politics. Despite this the content of political campaigns is rarely questioned especially as means for representation.

In this paper, we address the opinion responsiveness of election campaigns through time series cross-sectional models. We use data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) covering the 2009 German national election including daily content analyses of TV evening newscasts on campaigns and a rolling cross-section

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survey on a daily basis asking voters what their opinion is concerning "What is the most important problem facing Germany today?"[1] We find evidence of opinion responsiveness in the 2009 German Federal election campaign for several of the most salient issues. We also find evidence of by party variation and a systematic level of under-responsiveness to these most salient issues. Moreover, our results suggest that political campaigns not only dynamically respond to public opinion, but also opponent campaigns. However, in 2009 German national election the focus of the campaign on the party (SPD) or an individual candidate (CDU/CSU) led to more and less responsiveness respectively.

The rest of this paper takes the following form. First we build a theory of campaign responsiveness to voters and responsiveness to opponents in the next two sections. Next we present a discussion of the data and methods we use to test the hypotheses that stem from our theoretical expectations. Our time series analyses of the responsiveness of electoral campaigns to public priorities are followed by a brief concluding summary as well as a discussion of the implications that our findings have for understanding electoral campaigns and the opinion responsiveness of political parties.

2. The responsiveness of campaigns to voters

Political parties are crucial intermediary actors who connect the mass public with political decision-making. One of their most important duties is to take up voters' preferences and turn them into political decisions. From a normative perspective parties should be responsive to voters, as congruence between parties and voters is a necessary condition for political representation. While questions concerning representation and the functioning of democracy will always exist, it is hard to argue that electoral campaigns are not focused on representation or at least the illusion of it (Vavreck, 2009). Moreover, as Downs (1957) notes parties strive to minimize the distance between themselves and voters in order to gain votes by changing their policy positions. Regardless of the actual degree of correspondence between what political actors claim and what they actually do once in office, election campaigns are designed to communicate the message that voters want to hear. Whether a campaign is intentionally misleading or is a tool for parties to communicate their goals with the public does not change their desire to respond to public concerns as cultivating voters is a necessary condition for electoral success (Vavreck, 2009). Our theory builds on the assumption that electoral campaigns are responsive to voters' demands in parties' own strategic interests. However, in contrast to the classical proximity model, our assumptions about campaign agendas begin one step earlier. Building on the work of Klüver and Spoon (2014) we assume that parties not only compete with each other by altering their policy positions, but also respond to the policy priorities of voters like other political institutions (e.g. Bevan and Jennings, 2014). While the party's own manifestos are one clear guide for the campaign agenda, it is all but impossible to fully and accurately attend to all the issues contained in a manifesto through the course of a campaign. Parties are much like individuals and operate in a boundedly rational manner, which allows for the limited processing of information and issues as opposed to a fully rational actor (Simon, 1971). This is especially true due to the abundance of information that is both available and relevant to politics that make it all but impossible to gather and assess every piece of data (Jones, 1994). Furthermore, the limited human capacity to consider multiple issues and ideas at once is further transferred to group situations where the common approach is to either work together on a limited set of issues or to have a variety of issues filtered through a hierarchical structure (Cohen et al., 1972). The limited cognitive capacity of political parties is what forces parties to use heuristics and other shortcuts when making decisions. Public priorities are one such shortcut that highlights the importance of particular issues for the public. It is not a great logical leap that the issues the public cares about are the issues they want candidates to address and are the likely issues that individuals will base their votes on for as Pietryka and Boydstun (2012, 739) put it: "Candidates who are out of step with the electorate on salient issues may be particularly disadvantaged." This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1. Election campaigns are responsive to public priorities.

Nevertheless, responsiveness may vary between parties and electoral contexts. As Manza and Cook (2002a, 651) suggested: "Under some conditions and with some kinds of issues, the relationship between public opinion and policy is strong, under other conditions with other issues, it is weak." This contingency view should not only hold true for the relationship between public opinion and public policy outcomes, it should also be applicable to the relationship between public opinion and political campaigns as an expression of possible policy outcomes at an early stage. Therefore, we would expect the responsiveness to vary between parties dependent on three factors: first the *popularity of candidates*, second *the fundamentals of the campaign* and third *issue ownership* discussed next in turn.[2]

2.1. Popularity of candidates

Parties have different candidates and run their campaigns under different conditions based on the experience and popularity of their candidates. As research on the responsiveness of US Presidents has demonstrated, popular presidents are less responsive to public priorities as popularity is in part a resource that allows them to pursue their own policy goals (Hibbs, 1987; Hicks, 1984; Manza and Cook, 2002b). In an electoral campaign a party with a strong and popular candidate therefore might also not be as responsive as a party with a weak, less popular candidate. The later should have stronger incentives to fulfill voters' wishes to help build popularity whereas the party with a more popular candidate can instead employ a highly personalized campaign, meaning a campaign in which "the personality and the competence of a party's major candidate is the central campaign message" (Schulz et al., 2005, 59) and not responsiveness to public priorities. In the cases of the 2009 German federal election the CDU's candidate for chancellor, Angela Merkel, proved substantially more popular than the SPD's candidate Frank-Walter Steinmeier (see Fig. 1).

2.2. Fundamentals of the Campaign

Every campaign is influenced by its political context or the so-called fundamentals, in particular the economy (Erikson and Wlezien, 2012; Vavreck, 2009). Normally, the incumbent party should prime economic issues only if it benefits from economic

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[1] The original survey question in German reads, "Wenn Sie nun an die aktuelle politische Situation denken — was ist Ihrer Meinung nach gegenwärtig das wichtigste politische Problem in Deutschland?" The literal translation of which is, "If you now consider the current political situation — in your opinion, what is the most important political issue facing Germany at the moment?" However, as noted by Jennings and Wlezien (2011), this survey question is responded to in the same manner as the translated English equivalent.

[2] As our paper is based on a single election we do not offer testable hypotheses based on this variation; however, the remainder of this section offers important insights for the results presented in this paper as well as future research.