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The art of impression management: self-presentation in local-level campaign literature

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Abstract

Campaign literature is a ubiquitous feature on the American electoral landscape. Candidates distribute written materials for the sole purpose of persuading voters to vote for them instead of for another candidate. The information a candidate includes in a piece of campaign literature, as well as how it is presented, can reveal his or her perception of the criteria citizens use when deciding for whom to vote. The findings from an examination of 288 pieces of campaign literature distributed by candidates for city council seats in 11 Ohio counties in November 1997, suggest that they perceive potential voters as being susceptible to both intellectual and emotional campaign messages. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Campaign literature in the form of flyers, brochures, fact sheets, and letters is a ubiquitous feature on the American electoral landscape. Funded by political parties, political actions committees, private individuals, and often their own bank accounts, candidates for public office invest time and money in coordinating the development of written campaign materials. What candidates hope to gain from this investment is clear. Candidates for public office distribute written materials for the sole purpose of persuading voters to vote for them instead of for another candidate.

Using written campaign literature as a way to gain votes is particularly important for candidates for local level political office because they, unlike their counterparts for state and national offices, seldom have the resources to barrage the voting public with radio and TV spots. In addition, written materials have the advantage of being portable in that they can physically be

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passed from one community member to another thus increasing the number of opportunities they have to make an impression. Distributing written materials is also an excellent way for local candidates to utilize volunteer labor and gain votes, because although it takes professionals to produce a TV commercial, it doesn't take much skill to hang a flyer on a doorknob.

Analyzing campaign literature from local elections is an especially productive way to examine the relationship between candidates and their perceptions of potential voters because there are fewer mediating influences than are found in state and national races. For example, political party impact may be minimal because many local offices are nonpartisan, thus allowing candidates to communicate their own positions on issues. Also, candidates may be limited in how much they can spend on their campaigns because of local campaign finance ordinances so candidates compete on a fairly even footing. In addition, the influence of professional campaign consultants is probably less because candidates in local races are typically unable to hire them because they do not have enough money. As a result of these factors, the campaign literature that candidates for local office distribute can be a direct reflection of themselves and the way they view the candidate–voter relationship.

Although the efficacy of written campaign literature in winning votes is difficult to determine, candidates for public office treat it as an essential ingredient in their election strategy. Most candidates have probably been influenced by the conventional wisdom that postulates for a candidate's name to be remembered, it must be seen by a potential voter at least seven times during the course of the campaign. They may also agree with sociologist Erving Goffman that

The more information the audience [potential voters] has about a performer [candidate], the less likely it is that anything they will learn during the interaction will radically influence them. On the other hand, where no prior information is possessed, it may be expected that the information gleaned during the interaction will be relatively crucial (1959, p. 222).

Since candidates for political office, even at the local level, are unlikely to be personally acquainted with the majority of the electorate, it is probably in their best interests to inform the voting public about themselves and their qualifications.

When designing campaign literature for distribution, a candidate obviously wants to conjure a particular image in the mind of the perspective voter that will lead to a mark in the column beside his or her name. Thus, the information contained in a piece of campaign literature, and how it is presented, can suggest the candidate's perception of the criteria citizens use when deciding to whom to give their votes. What qualities do local level office seekers think that will attract votes as revealed by what they include in their campaign literature?

To answer this question, the researcher examined several hundred pieces of campaign literature using a content analysis methodology. Each exhibit was examined along two dimensions: its *content*, the substance of the message, and its *style*, the arrangement of parts of which the communication is made. Underlying assumptions of this study were that (1) candidates make decisions about what goes into their campaign literature and how it is presented based on their perceptions of the voting public, and that (2) these perceptions can be identified through examination of their outputs, i.e., written campaign literature such as brochures, flyers, fact sheets, business cards, and so forth.

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