

Aiming to sway voters, candidates emphasize hot-button issues across party lines

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The 2004 presidential candidates reached out to voters across the political aisle – but not in a genuinely conciliatory spirit, according to a new analysis which says that George W. Bush and John Kerry sought to peel away voters from the opposing party using hot-button issues. The strategy leads to fragmentation, say political scientists, as candidates focus on multiple controversial issues, such as stem cell research or immigration, often communicating different priorities in an effort to gain votes.

D. Sunshine Hillygus, Frederick S. Danziger Associate Professor of Government in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, and Todd G. Shields, professor of political science at the University of Arkansas, extensively studied campaign strategy during the 2004 general election, work that may illuminate strategy in the current presidential race. The research has been published in a new book, "The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns" (Princeton University Press, 2008).

“We were surprised by the number of different issues that candidates took a stand on, and the individualization of messages to each voter,” Hillygus says. “By microtargeting these wedge issues, someone from the opposite party might be convinced to vote for the candidate on the basis of that issue. However, in emphasizing different controversial issues to different voters, it becomes more difficult for the rest of the electorate to understand the real priorities of the candidate.”

Candidates are interested in deploying campaign funds as strategically as possible, and a recent increase in the availability of voter information has enabled candidates to focus only on those individuals likely to vote, and potentially vote for the candidate. According to Hillygus, persuadable or swing voters are not likely to be uninformed or wishy-washy, or to lack party allegiances, since those individuals are unlikely to vote at all. In reality, those likely to switch their vote are individuals from the opposite party who agree with a candidate on a particular issue.

Since the 2000 election, candidates have amassed large voter databases compiled from voter registration files and supplemented with consumer information. These databases have made possible dog whistle politics, in which candidates communicate messages that can be heard only by intended targets, like the high-pitched dog whistle that can be heard by dogs but is not audible to the human ear.

What Hillygus and Shields found surprising is that candidates are not using these lists to strategically target their base party voters, as is often thought to be the case. Instead, they are looking to locate voters across the political spectrum who agree with them on these wedge issues.

Candidates are also now increasingly likely to overlook unregistered voters, viewing them as unlikely to vote in the upcoming election. Consequently, entire segments of the population are ignored, Hillygus says, creating a cycle wherein unregistered voters are ignored by the campaign dialogue, and therefore continue not to vote.

Hillygus and Shields conducted surveys of voters, interviewed campaign consultants, and collected political direct mail sent by the candidates and parties in the last three weeks of the campaign. They found that the Bush and Kerry campaigns talked about 75 different issues in their direct mail.

Additionally, the messages contained in direct mail pieces were often very different from those included in a television advertisement. Candidates often take positions and make statements in direct mail that they would never express on television, explains Hillygus: Since television reaches a broad audience, it is not possible to target individual viewers and candidates must be careful to communicate broad messages.

The fragmentation of dialogue about issues also has consequences once a candidate is elected to office. By emphasizing different priority issues to different voters, it becomes a challenge to understand the issues upon which the candidate was elected, and a candidate does not receive a clear mandate from voters with regard to governance.

“As a result of this microtargeting, we aren’t hearing cohesive priorities from the candidate, or subsequently receiving a clear message about the wants and needs of voters,” Hillygus says. “Many people are hearing varying issue priorities from the candidates, and that is changing the tenor of the campaign dialogue.”

Source: Harvard University

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