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Deliberative political campaigns

Democracy, autonomy and persuasion

Groen-Reijman, E.

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Introduction

'Who is the hidden persuader and how does he differ from the ordinary advocate? [...] The methods are similar to those of Pavlov's famous conditioned-reflex experiments with dogs. Ring a bell and the dog salivates. No thought processes intervene here. Non-critical reflex action – this is the goal of the hidden persuader.' – Franklyn S. Haiman, 1958

From the very onset in ancient Athens – from Plato's cave dwellers to Schumpeter's clueless masses – democracy has suffered under the suspicion that the people simply do not possess the capacity for judgment required for rational decision-making. Nowadays, such contentions are often rooted in the concerns regarding political campaign tactics, and the supposed ability and inclination of political parties to manipulate voters with every means at their disposal. As was the case when Haiman wrote the passage above in 1958, new campaign practices are hailed and feared as the final step in gaining total control over the popular will. Political strategies are eagerly elaborated on by journalists; campaign professionals are dubbed spin 'doctors', suggesting scientific precision and efficacy. Some of the critique of modern campaigns is justified, as will be defended in this thesis. In other cases, the outrage and suspicion might be instances of something else; for instance, ancient suspicion against popular rule, or a romantic longing for authenticity which disregards the organizational complexity of large-scale democracies and the kind of communicative procedures such complexity requires.

Recently, such concerns have taken on new force with the emergence of electorally successful populist movements, resulting in the United Kingdom 'Brexit' vote of June 2016 and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in November 2016. These decisions have driven the discussion about the deliberative quality of Western political democracies in the context of so many current challenges. The fragmented online media landscape; 'fake news'; so-called 'filter bubbles' going unchecked; the spreading of harmful information about candidates; opaque financing groups and foreign interference in elections; and the influence of big data, all these developments seem to provide increasing opportunities

for political manipulation and control.¹ In these discussions it is clear that both the epistemic flaws and the possibility of influencing citizens' judgments are considered severe breaches of legitimacy, to the extent that the subsequent outcomes are still being questioned.²

As a central feature of our modern political landscape, how we evaluate campaign communication techniques is an important normative question for democracy. However, different understandings of democracy bring on different challenges. Within some conceptions, campaigning is hardly considered to be relevant at all. Within highly competitive, power-oriented conceptions of democracy, such as that of Joseph Schumpeter, campaigns may be designed in whichever way best serves the purpose of acquiring sufficient votes – and thus obtaining political power. The end is then deemed sufficient to justify the chosen means. A similar claim can be made for liberal, aggregative theories of democracy, which base the legitimacy claim of democracy on a market-like competition between particular preferences. Certain instrumental limitations might have to be put in place here to ensure that citizens' preferences will not be distorted by deceptive communication, but these limitations can be solely instrumental, as the legitimacy claims of such models are not contingent on the kind of communication leading up to political decisions. Within agonistic accounts of democracy, the very agonistic nature of politics as such requires that a low threshold must be maintained regarding the various ways that making political claims can be considered right or appropriate, as much of what constitutes politics, including the kind of communication used, must be open to free contestation by all participants. Of course, such theories can criticize, for instance, the hegemony of particular political actors in the political domain, including the dominance of political parties.

For deliberative democracy however, the question how the public debate is conducted is elementary, as its claims regarding the legitimacy of political decisions refer directly to the kind of communication that brings them about. Democratic decisions are legitimate to the extent that these procedures are fair and have epistemic quality, that is, they are based on sound arguments. The democratic procedure must therefore be designed

¹ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, (London: Penguin, 2011); Tamsin Shaw, "Invisible Manipulators of Your Mind," *New York Review of Books*, April 20, 2017.

² Theodore Schleifer, 'John Lewis: Trump is Not a 'Legitimate' President,' CNN, January 14, 2017; Carole Cadwalladr, "The Great British BrexitRobbery: How Our Democracy Was Hijacked," *The Guardian*, May 7, 2017.

in such a way that arguments and open interactions – rather than other forces at play – determine the outcome. This not only means that the procedure requires excluding these other influences, such as economic or political power, but also that democratic procedures must be conducted in a deliberative way. Public debate is an intrinsic part of this political procedure, and deliberative democracy makes high demands on the way it is conducted. As political campaigns shape the public debate in a pervasive sense, for theories of deliberative democracy, the way in which they are conducted is a matter of democratic legitimacy as such. At the same time, it may seem obvious that most of the campaign techniques that are ever more common in political communication, such as spin, framing or targeting, are deeply problematic for deliberative democracy. As will become clear throughout the course of this thesis, the confrontation between the ideals of deliberative democracy and the practice of political campaigns gives a more fragmented and complicated picture. Therefore I will argue that more specific criteria need to be developed in order to make a precise evaluation of campaigning techniques possible.

I argue that political election campaigns can indeed use many modern persuasion techniques, while still answering to the norms of deliberative democracy. This is of course subject to certain limits and conditions. Throughout the argument, I develop a framework for how campaigns can develop legitimate techniques of political persuasion and to what extent this is applicable.

The evaluation I offer is guided by the basic principles of deliberative democracy, specifically those of the epistemic value of deliberation and respect for citizen autonomy, which, as I will argue, both ground and shape democratic procedures. This normative outlook on democracy then serves as the basis for developing a systemic view of deliberative democracy in which campaigns play a central role. In contrast to other accounts, I do not consider political campaigning to be a strategic exception amidst deliberatively structured institutions. On the contrary, I argue that campaigns should offer normative grounds for the legitimacy of representation in deliberative democracy, and that they therefore should adhere to deliberative principles. These principles include inclusive and critical debate, and such debates require other forms of communication to strengthen involvement, participation and trust.

This normative framework for democratic systems is then applied to campaign techniques which are central to modern campaigning and offer challenges to deliberative principles, either because they could be

taken as attempts to manipulate voters, to steer the course of the public debate while avoiding critical scrutiny, or to influence voters in illegitimate ways. By emphasizing the diversification of the deliberative system and by demonstrating how campaigns can be understood as communicative, I will argue that for all these techniques there are conditions under which they can be a permissible part of deliberative campaigns. This of course is not to dismiss the many real-world examples of instances where these techniques have been used either to manipulate voters or to obstruct the epistemic function of democratic interactions, and I will make clear in each case on what grounds we can determine the threshold for the legitimacy of its use. In some cases, this will be more granular than in others, as the evaluation of cases also depends on the intended objectives and the degree to which a technique is employed. In specific cases, an inconclusive evaluation is offered, providing a conditional analysis and hopefully inviting closer scrutiny and further debate.

In my argument, I will take stock of how campaign practices function according to research in the empirical field of political science and communication studies. This review does not serve to make empirical claims about the state of affairs in campaigning. Rather, the case studies draw out and sharpen normative arguments, making clear where the normative challenges of modern campaigning lie for deliberative democracy.

The argument as constructed in this thesis has three aims. First, it sets out to confront the normative theory of deliberative democracy with real cases of campaign communications in modern democracies. It does so for two reasons: one, to make clear what the practical implications are of the principles of deliberative democracy, by applying them to the case of political campaigns. And secondly, by confronting deliberative theory with the complex phenomena of campaign persuasion, to develop out a more sophisticated understanding of deliberative democracy's core ideas, such as persuasion, strategy and autonomy. The second aim is to connect deliberative theory more strongly with related political concepts, particularly representation, partisanship, and the role of campaigning, and thus contribute to the systemic approach to deliberative democracy. Thirdly and somewhat more broadly, this thesis sets out to disentangle the ideal of deliberative democracy, the legitimate critique of some strategic aspects of campaigning, and unfounded misgivings about the reality of politics in complex, modern democratic societies. Thus, it aims to clear up what I consider to be normative confusion in both public and certain

academic debates about the supposed distortion of public opinion instigated by political campaigning. In doing so, I attempt to avoid an ideal view of deliberation on the one hand, and an overly cynical view on the other. If successful, the argument manages to be both critical and realist, while showing how some familiar features of modern democracies are in fact, at least in some form, also part of the ideal of deliberative democracy.

The argument is structured as follows. The first part of the thesis consists of four chapters in which a normative account of deliberative democracy is developed. First, the normative model of deliberative democracy is defended in terms of its procedural and epistemic value (chapter 1). Secondly, persuasion is delineated from manipulation on the basis of citizen autonomy (chapter 2). Thirdly, a systemic account of deliberative democracy is argued for, showing the importance of campaigns for deliberative representation (chapter 3). Finally, interpersonal norms of deliberation are developed to show to what extent various forms of communication have value for democracy (chapter 4). This framework is then applied in the second half of this thesis to four modern campaign techniques: voter research and micro-targeting (chapter 5), framing (chapter 6), spin (chapter 7) and emotional and personal campaigning (chapter 8).

Before proceeding, four general issues remain regarding the topic and scope of this thesis. First, as it deals with political election campaigns, I refer to political parties as actors only because this is most often the case; of course, when *other* political actors run an election campaign, such as individual politicians or differently organized political groups, the arguments apply to them as well. As election campaigns are the focus of this thesis, the arguments apply specifically to those kinds of campaigning that are directly related to the electoral process. However, some of the arguments, particularly about the requirements for political persuasion in a deliberative democracy, will be applicable to other political campaigns, perhaps most prominently for campaigns regarding referendum. Although the dynamics are quite similar, such campaigns are however not discussed explicitly.

Second, this thesis deals with the evaluation of modern political election campaigns in western democracies. As such it assumes, with some support from empirical evidence, that even though the democracies within which these campaigns operate differently, there are similarities between these campaigns which show a general tendency to employ certain

persuasive techniques, such as voter research, spin and framing.³ ‘Modern’ here must be understood broadly and indicates campaign techniques which, in Pippa Norris’ analysis, are responses to the introduction of broadcast media, and ‘postmodern’ techniques which provide opportunities for targeting and ‘narrowcasting’ provided by new technologies and online media.⁴ The communication research literature this thesis draws on illustrates how these techniques operate, provides examples and shows some of their effects. These insights serve to inform the normative analysis; the thesis does not attempt to make claims about the state of modern western campaigns beyond the claim that its normative arguments are relevant.

Thirdly, as this thesis deals with legitimate persuasion, campaign financing is not discussed as one of its topics. This is not to deny the vast influence that campaign finance regulation can have on the structure of campaigns and the means of persuasion chosen. However, it is taken here as a background condition, similar to the the specific democratic system within which campaigns operate. For instance, district and first-past-the-post systems versus systems of proportional representation can also be highly relevant for how campaigns are organized. They are not as such forms of political persuasion and are therefore not a topic of evaluation in the scope of this thesis.

Finally, over the years that I have been writing this thesis, the political landscape has changed. Particularly since 2016 debates about problems with campaigning techniques have taken center stage, and with good reason. However, because these problems have been so prominently discussed, it is important to stress that this thesis takes a more long-term approach – including, but not limited to, addressing the more recent phenomena. Rather, it looks at a broader array of techniques that have been part of political campaigning for some time. The influence of micro-targeting, the fractured media landscape and the epistemic challenges these offer are very much part of these debates, and they will be discussed within the context of campaign effects. It is also worth emphasizing that

³ Nick Sparrow and John Turner, “The Permanent Campaign: The integration of market research techniques in developing strategies in a more uncertain political climate,” *European Journal of Marketing* 9/10 (2001);

Fritz Plasser and Gunda Plasser, *Global Political Campaigning: a Worldwide Analysis of Campaign Professionals and Their Practices* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002); Michael John Burton, William J. Miller and Daniel M. Shea, *Campaign Craft: The Strategies, Tactics and Art of Political Campaign Management* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015).

⁴ Pippa Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

some of the problems that have featured in these discussions have been such extreme cases, such as the spread of 'fake news' items, that they do not prominently feature in this thesis, even though they can of course be criticized using the arguments presented here.