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Deliberative political campaigns

Democracy, autonomy and persuasion

Groen-Reijman, E.

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Conclusion

Theorizing Campaign Techniques in Deliberative Democracies

Election campaigns are perhaps the most conspicuous part of modern democracies, and yet their normative theorizing remains limited. In this thesis, it has been shown that campaigns are an intricate part of deliberative systems, and therefore highly relevant for normative theories of deliberative democracy. Although modern campaign techniques offer some serious challenges for deliberation, they can also, under certain conditions, serve to realize important democratic values such as participatory engagement, competition and effective communication.

To show this, I have argued, first, for the importance of structuring democratic procedures, institutions and interactions according to deliberative principles. These principles concern the respect owed to citizens' autonomy and, therefore, to their rights and abilities to make political judgments which are recognizably their own, and the epistemic quality of democratic interactions and decisions, which is achieved through procedures which provide for a free and equal exchange of information, arguments, and perspectives. Only in this way can the complexities be accommodated that pluralist and often uncertain politics offer, in a way that gives the democratic process legitimacy and justifies political decisions to all whom they affect.

Despite the rationalist or elitist suspicions which deliberative theory sometimes gives rise to, deliberative principles can organize a highly complex society in an inclusive manner. This is shown by the systemic approach to deliberation, which ties the ideals of autonomous citizenship and high quality public discourse with institutions and a diverse range of communicative exchanges. Deliberative democracy is strengthened rather than weakened by political representation, as long as representatives are responsive to ongoing public debate, do not fixate their positions through asking to be mandated by voters, and campaign in a way that meets the

norms of deliberation. Campaigns then are central to the role of representation in deliberative legitimacy.

The campaign techniques that I have discussed affect the legitimacy of democracy on two levels. First, they affect the relationships between citizens, and between political representatives and the citizens they represent. Both of these relationships require respecting autonomy by not interfering manipulatively with each other's deliberation but also by, when possible, strengthening the conditions of autonomy through exchanging information, reflecting critically on each other's positions and arguments, and by facilitating equal participation for all. Second, campaigns affect the systemic conditions of fair and epistemic procedures. Campaigns in general influence the course of public debate, primarily during campaign time but also beyond, as with the emergence of permanent campaigning their influence becomes ever more blurred with the continuous interaction between politics, media and civil society. To argue that their role should be in accordance with the legitimacy norms of deliberative democracy is not to say that campaigns should in all their utterances meet the deliberative ideal. In a diversified deliberative system, some campaign communications can focus on drawing attention to issues or to mobilizing participation, while others are more engaged with laying out the argument for a policy or with critically engaging a political opponent. However, they should not be involved in practices which go against deliberative norms of legitimacy, by, for instance, manipulating citizens, or harming the epistemic conditions of the public sphere with lies, deception or willful distraction.

The systemic account of deliberative democracy does not require that campaigns achieve their full deliberative potential in all their communication choices; it allows for diversification and acknowledges that the role of specific institutions may have other requirements which, when satisfied, serves the deliberative system overall. In the case of campaigns, they serve not only to shape public debates about politics, formulate and distribute policy proposals and so on, but they also have the function of motivating and activating voters, and of competing with or challenging other political agents. Therefore, campaigns require forms of communication which may not fully meet the deliberative ideal, but achieving their democratic function well should in turn serve the deliberative quality of the democratic system overall. The argument that campaigns should be deliberative must be understood in this light. However, as campaigns have a great deal of influence on both voters and on the course of the public debate, and should also ground the legitimacy

of representation in approaching voters, deliberative norms for communication and political behavior should be a forceful guide for the campaign choices of political parties.

The campaign techniques evaluated – voter targeting, framing, spin and emotional campaigning – capture persuasive strategies which offer specific challenges to deliberative democracy. These practices have been analyzed using empirical literature and then evaluated by confronting them with the deliberative principles of respecting autonomy and upholding epistemic procedures. Moreover, these normative analyses have been related to other salient democratic principles that are prevalent in public discussions about political campaigns and have strong connections with deliberative democracy. For instance, the norm of authenticity is often invoked when the behavior of politicians is being evaluated, particularly during campaigns, but it is also a norm for communicative action. Moreover, democratic politics is tightly connected to the necessity of competition between political actors, but to what extent does competition justify strategic campaign choices? Because of their relevance for public discussions and democratic theory, these principles have been integrated into the normative picture. The distinction between communicative and strategic action, central to Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy, also offers grounds for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate influencing. Of course, the concept of communicative action does not preclude specific evaluations, as strategic action does not have to be concerned with persuasion at all; it can be a bargaining session, or even an economic exchange. However, when persuasive techniques in campaigns are used strategically, questions about the deliberative quality of the public sphere and of citizen manipulation arise.

This thesis evaluates whether specific campaign techniques are in accord with these norms and can thus be part of deliberative campaigns. For specific techniques, this judgment can only be made conditionally and tentatively. Some techniques, such as data-driven micro-targeting, constitute manipulation under some conditions. However, in many instances the influence of campaigns on the public debate is a matter of degrees; politicians should answer for the implicit claims in the frames they use, but to what extent? When does mobilizing speech dominate political discourse, excluding critical exchanges? Campaigns serve many goods in a democracy with – rightfully – limited resources. As many theorists of deliberative democracy would agree, real world democracies are unlikely to fully live up to the deliberative ideal, and the same must be said for

democratic campaigns. However, one of the aims of this thesis has been to separate the illegitimate from the conditionally legitimate.

Political influence constitutes manipulation when it is an intentionally hidden and distorting way to influence another's choice, creating an unequal distribution of power. Techniques are specifically at risk of becoming manipulative when they interact directly with voters: emotional campaigning, voter targeting and some instances of framing. However, shaping the public discourse so that it exclusively focuses on one subject, for instance, could also go towards manipulation. In an age of voter research, even when it is employed to differing degrees, the power balance between voters and their representatives is continuously fraught. I have shown that the legitimacy of these techniques depends on how campaigns use them. When voter targeting, for instance, reaches voters who otherwise might not have learned about positions they are interested in and agree with, then this use is not manipulation, even if public perception – which is in itself relevant for the legitimacy of the deliberative system – may consider it so. The other criterion, that of epistemically valuable procedures, relates most directly to techniques which influence public debate. The difficulty here is that evaluation will always depend in part on the substance of the message. However, as the quality of the procedures constitutes the quality of the outcome, as was argued in the first part of this thesis, the degree to which these influencing attempts are conducted openly is itself epistemically relevant. The legitimacy of campaign persuasion then depends on a campaign's respect for citizen autonomy, and on whether it adheres to epistemically valuable democratic procedures such as interactions that allow for inclusive forms of learning and criticism. Whether these techniques do so or not, depends on the end to which they are used and the degree to which their use and influence remains hidden from most citizens.

If we are to be optimistic about the future of large-scale representative democracies, then we must remain critical of the degree to which democratic institutions live up to their own promise. At the same time, we must do so without becoming weary of democracy never fully realizing its own ideal. I have criticized the use of campaign techniques while also indicating the ways in which modern campaign techniques may be used to strengthen communication in large-scale democracies. This is not to say that if the guidelines offered here were followed, a perfectly functioning deliberative system would emerge. The shape of our institutions still leaves much room for improvement. However, I do believe

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that if campaigns could take on a stronger deliberative role, this would result in better civic education, greater legitimacy for political decisions, and a more respectful relationship between politicians and the citizens they represent.