



Political Parties – Challenges and Perspectives

Voting and Campaigns in Times of Polarisation

An Assessment Based on International Examples

Frank Priess

Both democratic and non-democratic elections, and the hopes people place in them, raise the same basic questions: Who has the right approach to challenges of the future? Who will make it better for us in the years to come? These questions moved people in the past and continue to do so.

Once again, all eyes around the world turn towards the US presidential election. Political analysts and campaign workers alike consider the contest in the US to be the mother of all battles when it comes to technological innovations and developments in campaign practice. Nevertheless, the US remains a great exception rather than a great example – the framework conditions are too specific and the use of funds too unparalleled. Having said that, in the run-up to decisive weeks of the campaign, international advisers are wheeling their shopping carts through the US campaign supermarket, browsing for instruments that might be decisive even at home.

The focus was once again on the digital, and not just because of COVID-19. “It will certainly be the most digital election campaign in American history”,¹ Mario Voigt predicted early on. This was an advantage for Trump with his Twitter followers and Facebook friends. The shady use of algorithms and user data from social networks such as Facebook with which Cambridge Analytica achieved notoriety are still fresh in everyone’s minds and have been detailed in the book “Mindf*ck” by whistleblower Christopher Wylie.² As Paul Starr put it, “[t]he 2016 Brexit and US elections provided real-world examples of covert disinformation delivered via Facebook”.³

Messages under the Radar

Personality traits are the basis for predicting voting behaviour, and that behaviour is to be influenced by highly personalised messages and information from the relevant social platforms, allowing unprecedented microtargeting. Psychological warfare techniques have

the additional attraction of flying effortlessly under the radar of general attention and thus enhancing the element of surprise: Changes become noticeable only gradually, most messages are only visible in increasingly interconnected bubbles with public discourse being undermined. This is supplemented by instruments such as influencer marketing: Parties canvass credible representatives, especially in the younger target groups. In the German European election, the famous “Rezo video” entitled “The destruction of the CDU” was a wake-up call: The Christian Democrats were caught off guard by the high number of views and the reactions on all types of media. Its “timid” response in the form of a PDF was met with pity and derision. The CDU has now reacted and visibly placed its digital work on a new footing – its composed reaction to the theft of the letter C from party headquarters by Greenpeace activists is just one example of this.

While the influence of Twitter and Facebook has scarcely been digested, the community has long been considering potential political applications from new services such as TikTok and Telegram: A seemingly harmless app for short videos, but one that is used by large swathes of young audiences, immediately prompts campaigners to wonder whether it can also be used to deliver their own political messages. “Messenger services” are often the instrument of choice for coordinating and making announcements in closed user groups – the more discreet, the better. The Columbian communication expert Nury Astrid Gomez Serna has observed a development from “mass appeal to selectivity”, not only in digital campaigning but in in-person campaigning, too.

Compounding the problem is that these instruments open the gates to influence from external actors – the degree to which Russia contributed to Donald Trump’s 2016 electoral victory and to the success of the Leave majority in Britain’s Brexit vote remains controversial and will probably never be determined conclusively. Parallel to this, deficiencies in cybersecurity play a role in further undermining trust in the legitimacy of democratic decisions, especially in societies that were polarised to begin with. If candidates suggest to their own adherents that defeat can only be the result of manipulation, this message may fall on fertile ground and bear unforeseeable fruit.

The polarisation of societies and weakening of their interior cohesion over the years – not to mention the role of filter bubbles – creates a framework for many election campaigns that imbues old differences with new characteristics. Urban-rural contrasts, party preferences based on education level or employment realities, generation gaps – these have always existed but now appear to be especially relevant fault lines.

The Problem with Forecasts

This also contributes to the phenomenon of election forecasts across the globe being completely wrong: Those who focus on Russia’s major cities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg and the young, cosmopolitan voters there will estimate the opposition to Putin’s “United Russia” as being stronger than those who consider rural, traditional spaces, which can be reached with entirely different messages and where nationalism and church affiliation play a far greater role. In the so-called Arab Spring, the focus on those who congregated in the squares of the capitals led to an underestimation of the traditional orientation and organisational force of associations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, whose goals have nothing to do with the expected path to Western modernity. And then there is wishful thinking – when looking at the US elections, not least in Germany, the tendency is to expect the coastal Democrats, who appear

more modern and are supported by Hollywood stars, to defeat the “hicks” and “deplorables” from the Midwest and the Bible Belt.

Yet there is evidence that this picture could also be too black-and-white. Current regional elections in Russia show that, even outside metropolises, the public is outraged over corruption on the part of those in power, and that those who effectively protest this corruption and with sound tactics have a chance at victory – always assuming reasonably free and fair elections. The election in Belarus also bore testimony to the fact that protest movements against an authoritarian regime can encompass various classes of society. And in some places, such expectations compel those in power to prevent a partly democratic election, to eliminate rival candidates, and to intimidate public and the media. An example of this is Hong Kong.

Currently, we are witnessing a race between those using new tools to open new spaces and those trying to close such spaces again.

And we have come to learn that social networks can be a double-edged sword. At the beginning of some social or democratic movements, conventional wisdom dictated that such networks heralded an age of democratic development, which those in power could no longer control. “Spontaneous” gatherings for demonstrations and other activities developed enormous power, even in countries such as Iran during the 2009 “Green Movement”. However, authoritarian regimes quickly learned to infiltrate social networks, forced them behind the “Great Firewall”, and censored them mercilessly – sometimes with cutting-edge software and the support of Western technology companies worried about market share. Currently, we are witnessing a real race between those using new tools to open new spaces and those trying to close such spaces





Broad participation: The election in Belarus also bore testimony to the fact that protest movements against an authoritarian regime can encompass various classes of society. [Source: © Tut.By via Reuters.](#)

completely again. The group that ultimately wins remains to be seen.

“Network Sovereignty” – a Killer Term

The liberal West, which has long ceased to be a geographical term, should however ensure that authoritarian regimes cannot, from the outset, claim protection from international agreements in the area of telecommunications when evoking the language of “network sovereignty” as a smokescreen to subjugate civil society. And this does not take into account the damage these weapons of new surveillance instruments could do in the hands of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes – a social credit system such as that in China makes every last corner of people’s private lives transparent to the state. It is worrisome enough that Chinese companies are exporting the associated software with great success – the customer list is

revealing not only in Africa; it includes countries such as Venezuela, too. Much that is currently being developed with economic objectives and based on artificial intelligence and on big data has parallel political applications. Here, American technology companies are leading the pack, and Palantir, which specialises in data collection, is heading for an IPO. The question of how efficient data protection can counteract these trends and the extent to which the “insight interests” of users in business and politics can be limited is likely to be a decisive future question and will affect election campaigns as well. Eduardo Magrani says that many countries have no regulations governing any of this.⁴

Changes in media behaviour now also have a significant impact on public discourse in democratic societies. A common information base of the sort that used to be provided by public broadcasting and regional newspapers is becoming

increasingly rare – the journalist has lost power and influence in his role as the gatekeeper. The profession began to lose its ability to define thought decades ago – the electoral victories of Helmut Kohl and Ronald Reagan in the teeth of the entire intellectual class of media representatives were always striking examples. Yet, the media still retained a certain sovereignty over what could be thought. Today, however, the versions of reality held by various portions of the public are more and more disparate. The growing market for conspiracy theories of all shades is perhaps the most salient example of this. Those whose contacts are primarily within their own group and whose social networks reinforce their views and consider this to be representative of the entire society will have difficulty accepting electoral results that favour entirely different options. That brings us back to the US and this election campaign.

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Party Fatigue and Populist Candidates

An examination of recent elections, however, shows a few consistencies and a strengthening of long-familiar trends. For instance, while things look bleak for established parties, the trend towards trust in individuals and movements continues. Many parties have failed to move with societal developments and to open themselves and make themselves attractive for new generations and issues. Remaining members tend to cling on and form elite coalitions that may conceal and delay the decline but do little to change the overall trajectory. Since the Tunisian parliamentary elections in 2019, President Kais Saied, himself an independent, has

not commissioned a leading party with heading a government. Saied himself tends toward approaches involving direct democracy.

But that does not necessarily mean that these new candidates are doing a better job or that the



Spoilt for choice: Who has the right answers to the challenges of the future? Source: © Issei Kato, Reuters.

trust placed in them is justified – and this calls the entire democratic system and its recruiting mechanisms into question. This development is especially worrisome in times of system competition, when authoritarian regimes try to score points with superior efficiency and show

better results in such areas as combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus should remain on the fact that such crises also highlight the deficits of authoritarian government (such as misrepresentation of information due to false caution or fear with no investigative journalism



to set the record straight), including the fact that citizens of such countries have no opportunity to punish those in power for substandard performance by voting them out.

The empirical record is unclear, as the example of Latin America shows. Party fatigue in Mexico and Brazil during recent elections has given rise to charismatic figures at the head of movements or new parties – and both exhibit a talent for polarisation, for populism: the people here, the corrupt elites there. To date, political successes of these figures have been extremely modest. At the same time, a “classic” governing party such as that of President Lacalle Pou in Uruguay has currently achieved the greatest success in the dramatic period of combating COVID-19. In some places, conflicts arise whose years of stability make the upheaval almost entirely unexpected, even though the underlying problems of social inequality and injustice are by no means a new phenomenon. A prime example is Chile. The result is often a completely fragmented political landscape that does not allow any projections to be made about future developments, especially when individuals have become much more important to elections than the preferences expressed on party platforms. Peru has long been an example of such uncertainty. Everywhere, including in Latin America, voting bases are melting away, profiles are ever-more blurred, and many parties traditionally exhibit far more interest in successful campaign instruments than in strategy or the content that they ought to convey. However, the long-term ties of emotion and tradition should still not be completely ignored, especially in rural areas and among older voters. There is no uniform picture anywhere.

Democracy under Fire

This continues to be true of election and campaign framework conditions, which overall have scarcely improved in recent years. The number of countries whose elections Freedom House and others consider truly free is on the decline, and Reporters Without Borders expresses alarm

in the face of great pressure exerted upon freedom of the press in many places. Many hopes for fair democratic competition have been dashed. A prime example is Southeast Asia, where countries such as Thailand and Cambodia have experienced clear setbacks.

The disparate access to mass media remains a lever that influences elections to the disadvantage of challengers, including in Europe. The disqualification of promising opposition candidates, party bans, manipulated voter rolls, lack of independent oversight bodies such as electoral courts, and persecution of the opposition to the point of politically motivated assassinations – unfortunately none of this has really gone out of fashion. In conflict situations, the international community is quick to call for new elections even where the minimum conditions for democracy are not met. Current examples can be found in nations as diverse as Mali and Venezuela. The opposition is then presented with the crucial question of whether it should stand for election or not: If it does, it legitimises a highly dubious process, but if it doesn't, it is forced to defend itself and closes even the smallest window for continued participation. What is clear is that elections are a necessary but not a sufficient indicator of whether a state can be considered a democracy. It remains interesting that even the murkiest dictatorships do not believe they can abstain from the (apparent) legitimacy in the form of elections.

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“Election Day Is Not Thanksgiving”

Both democratic and non-democratic elections, and the hopes they represent, raise the same basic questions: Who has the right approach to challenges of the future? Who will make it better for us in the years to come? These questions moved people in the past and continue to do

so. “Election day is not Thanksgiving” was a favourite saying of Angela Merkel’s longstanding campaign advisor Klaus Schüler. His point was that gratitude is a very limited political category. Does the mood favour change? Are the people satisfied or dissatisfied? These are the questions that influence decisions – probably more so in parliamentary systems because of the stronger party identification than in presidential systems, especially when a successful incumbent has reached the term limit and has difficulty transferring his or her image to a preferred successor.

A central category for voting decisions remains the personal trust that individual candidates can generate – and such trust arises locally, independent of whether it is understood by people in foreign countries or not. That is why campaign tools such as motorcades, fairs, and large events are not becoming outdated in countries such as Tanzania; they remain central points for encounters between voters and candidates. Parties would be well advised to maintain a large toolbox of campaign instruments and to communicate with voters on all channels. Across the world, a good digital campaign is a prerequisite, but traditional campaigning techniques such as classic canvassing are by no means obsolete. “Americans are far from mere puppets in the hands of Silicon Valley,” says Paul Starr of his country. In Africa, “election promise trackers” and similar instruments are effective for monitoring political performance in countries like Senegal, Kenya, and South Africa.⁵

Candidate-centred elections require that candidates appear authentic and credible – and then certain inconsistencies can sometimes be ignored. Likability counts, and proximity to the people is an important characteristic. “People don’t like him” is virtually a political death sentence. And of course, elections today are still not a selection of ideal elements but rather a specific decision between two alternatives. A candidate has a chance even as the “lesser of two evils”, which is why the “values and demeanour campaign” staged by the Democrats in the US

as well as attempts to make the election a sort of referendum on Donald Trump and his quirks had its pitfalls.

The general question of the ultimate role of election campaigns remains open: Certain elements of a voting decision become established over a longer period of time, but in many places there is also a large number of undecided voters even shortly before the election. What’s more, there are plenty of examples showing how a lead can be squandered at the very end of a race.

-translated from German-

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- 2 Wylie, Christopher 2020: Mindf*ck: Wie die Demokratie durch Social Media untergraben wird, Cologne.
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