

The Importance of Media in Election Campaigns

Mainstream and Organics

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The virtue of democracy is that a democratic election can have multiple candidates from different political parties representing different ideologies going through a transparent campaign process so the voters can make an intelligent choice. The campaign process provides the candidates opportunities to demonstrate their ideology and leadership in attracting capable people to work for their campaign to i. communicate a clear campaign message to the public, ii. demonstrate the candidate understands of issues, iii. offer proposals to solve problems and iv. raise funds to run an effective campaign through media during the campaign process. Unfortunately, the modern day election, for example, the U.S. Presidential election, has evolved to a practice where candidates focus more on raising funds (iv) and generating sound-bite messages (i) rather than illuminating issues with depth of knowledge and proposing and/or debating solutions to problems facing the nation. (items ii and iii above) In an educated society with an intellectually sophisticated media, the voters through the media should be able to drill the candidates on items ii and iii via public inquiries, interviews, opinions and debates so that the candidates cannot escape a rigorous campaign test. The media plays an important role in the campaign process since it is difficult for every voter to have direct contact with every candidate and vice versa.

The United States is an advocate for democracy but even with her two centuries of practice and innovation of democracy, she still does not have an ideal election system today. The two main reasons are: One, not all voters are educated enough in comprehending issues and problem solving solutions without a good interpretation often through media; and two, the campaign process has become very expensive hence become susceptible to be influenced by big money often came from special interest groups. Due to these two reasons, not all voters participate in the election process (or the entire process) and some voters who do participate are influenced by big money through sound-bite messages purchased in the media or by the private communication like mailing, email and social network flooded via activists. The coming 2016 US Presidential election has 32 Republican and 7 democrat candidates. Obviously, it will be very difficult for the voters to know all the candidates, their messages and their capabilities. So once again, the race will become a money race; the candidates will have to compete in fund raising to raise enough money to stay in the race. In this situation, the media has to do a good job in tracking and exposing the candidates. The voters depend on that. The U.S. exports the notion of democracy but inadequately in exporting the communication sophistication the media and the voters needed in practicing the democracy.

In the United States, a two party system has been entrenched for over two centuries with sufficient number of turn-overs between two parties in controlling the White House and/or the two chambers of Congress. The media, with activists and/or money hands controlling them, naturally form two major camps. So the voters have to make a conscience effort (sophisticated enough) to wade through the media to get the unbiased facts or to uncover the truth. This is particularly challenging when voters are facing complex issues, for example, revitalizing the economy - creating jobs to reduce unemployment rate or increasing income for the working people. In this type of situation, the higher the voters are educated and the more intelligent and freer the media are in dealing with complex issues, the better the campaign process can deliver the right candidates for the voters to select. For the US 2016 Presidential election, Hillary Clinton is the leading candidate of the Democratic Party but she is facing 6 Democrat opponents

and 32 Republican opponents, how would the voters sift through the rhetoric in the media and obtain useful information about her and others? There is no easy way but engage in reading, thinking and dialoguing on the issues and candidates deeply – a sophisticated communication process.

Hillary Clinton in her campaign has proposed a profit-sharing plan for helping workers to get more fruits for their labor. In a speech, she offers firms a two-year tax credit for giving workers 15% profit sharing. Candidates typically make such promises to get votes. Is this really a good plan? Apparently not, Daniel Altman, a Harvard PhD in Economics, a contributing editor and columnist for Foreign Policy, a public speaker on economics and investing and an adjunct professor at the New York University Stern School of Business with previous full-time experience of economic journalist, does not think so. In his column, ‘Hillary Clinton’s Bad Economics’, published in FP July 22, 2015, he flatly stated that there was no robust evidence that workers would benefit – in fact, the lowest paid workers might actually suffer under Hillary’s plan. Altman claims: “Making part of workers’ incomes or wealth rise and fall with profits, which are volatile, may give them an incentive to work harder, but it also exposes them to risk. This is true for Profit-sharing programs as well as employee stock ownership. In fact, even if workers’ expectations for total income would be the same with or without a profit-sharing program, the extra uncertainty in their income implied by profit sharing would make them worse off.” Dr. Altman took the time to write to Hillary’s campaign researchers and received a bunch of reference papers but they did not prove to Dr. Altman that the plan would work and Hillary and her research team had thought through the problem. Dr. Altman not only published his opinion but also published the original letter he sent to the Hillary campaign team and their reply. I cite this Altman example here to illustrate what kind of intellectual intercourse or sophistication is necessary in the media during an election campaign in order for a democratic system to work - getting the correct information to the voters.

The voters must be able to appreciate the above exemplary media report in order to exercise their voting right. For a Presidential election, besides economy, many other domestic issues such as education, healthcare and retirement benefits, and foreign policies such as US-China-Russia relations as well as overall national budget management including military spending control, are all important issues for the voters and the media to drill seriously to the core of the issues. This is neither a simple process nor an easy one to achieve; worldwide, there are only a handful of nations that have reached partially to a sophistication level of media reporting and communication so their citizens are able to exercise an effective democratic election process. Many ‘democratic’ nations today run into problems can often be traced to a serious problem - the nation does not have a mature democratic system: (i) their media were not functioning properly - unable to rise above the biases, manipulations and shallow reporting, (ii) their media were not providing a useful information medium to the voters timely and (iii) the majority of their voters were simply not sophisticated enough for democracy. Unfortunately, even the U.S. suffers somewhat in the above problems; and in worse cases, the media and voters mutually reinforce this immaturity.

Greece’s democratic system is an example of not capable of managing herself through economic crisis and correcting her social ills. The voters cannot see beyond their immediate turmoil (can’t deal with causes) - hence casting meaningless resentful votes; the media was unwilling or unable to awaken the voters from a bad social dream; and the politicians were

simply manipulating the media for their political agenda. Similarly, Taiwan is another example of immature democracy. Two parties are staking two different political positions, but the media was incapable of reporting the truth, crystallizing their differences and drilling the politicians honestly to the core of the issues for the voters. For example, on the most critical issue of the Taiwan-Mainland relations, why the media won't drill Ms Tsai to provide a clear position paper on the issue even after her opponent Ms Hung volunteered and offer one. On economy, the media and the voters should have the sophistication to find out why people worry about economy and yet vote down all serious government economic proposals. Taiwan's media and voters must wise up to develop quickly the sophistication needed for practicing democracy; there are good examples (like FP-Altman) to learn from the U.S. even though she hasn't mastered it completely herself.