When Have Presidential Campaigns Decided Election Outcomes?

JAMES E. CAMPBELL

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WHEN HAVE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS DECIDED ELECTION OUTCOMES?

JAMES E. CAMPBELL
University at Buffalo, SUNY

How often and when have fall presidential general election campaigns during the past 50 years been decisive in determining which presidential candidate would receive the plurality of the national popular vote? This article addresses these questions using data from the Gallup Poll, the National Election Studies, and actual election returns for the 14 presidential elections from 1948 to 2000. Based on an analysis of four measures of net effects of general election campaigns from after the national party conventions until election day, there is some evidence of campaigns being decisive in 5 of the 14 elections examined. Campaigns after the conventions were probably decisive in two elections, the 1948 and 1960 contests, and possibly made the difference in the outcomes of the 1976, 1980, and 2000 elections. A conservative estimate is that campaigns conducted after the conventions have probably been decisive in about a quarter of presidential elections since 1948.

Presidential general election campaigns matter to the national division of the vote. Even claims that the net effects of campaigns are small do not deny that campaigns have at least "minimal effects" (Finkel, 1993; Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). The question posed here is not whether campaigns matter but whether they have mattered enough to have determined which presidential candidate won the plurality of the national popular vote. This research poses two related questions: How often have presidential general election campaigns after the parties' national nominating conventions decided who received the national popular vote plurality and in what specific elections have they probably been decisive?

Before addressing the questions of whether and when presidential campaigns have decided election outcomes, a few matters of definition require attention. What is encompassed by the fall general election campaigns, how are their effects to be measured, and what does it mean for campaign effects to be decisive?

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For the purposes of this study, a general election campaign involves all attempts to influence the vote decisions of potential voters from the time of the national conventions until election day. This time-based definition encompasses everything from candidate speeches and appearances to televised campaign advertising to neighbors exchanging political views over the back fence. As defined here, the fall campaign is not restricted to the official acts and decisions of the candidate campaigns. The net impact of the campaign is defined as the change in the vote distribution that occurs between the beginning of the postconvention campaign and the vote on election day.[1] This definition assumes that the presidential campaign is so omnipresent that all events and developments, from economic news to foreign crises, are funneled through the campaign or interpreted in the context of the campaign by the media and by potential voters.[2] Given the common reading of all national political activities for their electoral consequences (if not for their electoral inspiration), the assumption that this is the case during the several months leading up to the election would seem to be safe. Although campaigning prior to the national conventions may well affect general election votes, the focus of this study is on the net effects of that portion of the election year traditionally defined as the fall campaign.

What does it mean for campaign effects to be decisive? Campaigns are decisive if their effects reverse the popular vote outcome that would have resulted without a campaign.[3] Three effects of campaigns are possible. They may reinforce the outcome predetermined by voter decisions and inclinations established prior to the campaign; they may run contrary to these precampaign decisions, although not by enough to reverse the outcome; or campaigns may override the precampaign inclinations to elect candidates who otherwise would have been defeated. It is this last potential effect of campaigns that is the subject of this analysis. Put differently, and with apologies to Tom Holbrook (1996), how often and when have campaigns mattered in the way that matters most?[4]

It should be noted that fall campaigns may be important to an election's outcome without being decisive. They may even be important for their lack of effects. The focus of this study, however, is on their decisiveness, as demonstrated by changing the outcome from what it would have been otherwise.

Based on these definitions of fall general election campaigns, their effects, and what it means for them to be decisive, there are logically two factors that may affect whether a presidential campaign is decisive to the election's outcome. The first of these is the lead of the precampaign front-running candidate. There is a greater possibility of a campaign being decisive when there is no clear front-runner going into the campaign or when the front-runner's lead is slim. The second important factor is the magnitude and direction of the campaign's effect. A campaign may be decisive if its effect is large and in the direction of the candidate trailing at the outset.

DATA

The net overall effect of postconvention presidential general election campaigns on the national popular vote outcome is examined in two ways. The first approach is a pre-post analysis examining the difference between precampaign polls measured before the start of the campaign and the postcampaign vote. As defined here, the starting point of the campaign is immediately after the second national party nominating convention. If the precampaign preferences and the actual vote indicate majorities for different candidates, the intervening campaign may have been decisive to the outcome. Three readings of the precampaign poll data are examined. In one, the division of support for the candidates in the poll is accepted as the best estimate (albeit with some degree of uncertainty around it) of how the electorate would have voted prior to the campaign. A second reading corrects for possible inaccuracies in the precampaign poll, and the third reading adjusts for temporary convention bump effects. In addition to the preanalysis and postanalysis using preference polls, campaign effects are examined using the voters' reports of when they decided how they would vote. This second approach examines the vote choices of those who decided before the campaign (early deciders) and those who decided during the campaign (late deciders). If late deciders reverse the verdict of early deciders, the campaign may have been decisive.

The computation of these measures required three types of data: the actual national vote divisions, precampaign preference poll divisions, and the vote divisions of voters reaching precampaign decisions as

opposed to those who decided how they would vote during the campaign. The national vote data are from the official election returns as reported up to 1984 in *Guide to U.S. Elections* (Congressional Quarterly, 1985), *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* (Congressional Quarterly, 1989, 1993, 1997) for the 1988 through 1996 elections, and Cable News Network's (2001) Web site for 2000. The baseline or precampaign preference distribution is the in-party candidate's share of the two-party division of the Gallup Poll trial-heat or preference polls conducted before the campaign. The postcampaign measure is the share of the two-party national popular vote cast for the in-party candidate.

The precampaign poll data from 1948 to 2000 were examined as they were reported (with uncertainty estimates based on estimated poll variation in the postconvention period) and also in a corrected form, taking into account the likely inaccuracies in the polls as measures of voter preferences. Various sources of error creep into any survey, and the uncertainty about preferences several months before election day only adds to the imperfection of the measure (Campbell, 2000; Crespi, 1988; Erikson & Wlezien, 1998). The adjustments to the precampaign baseline poll are determined empirically. They are computed based on the error in the final preelection Gallup Poll. From 1948 to 2000, the average difference between these final Gallup Polls and the actual vote has been 2 percentage points, although the difference exceeded 3 percentage points in three elections and was approximately 5 points off in the legendary Truman-Dewey race of 1948. The correction term also takes into account the fact that there may be some true change in the vote between the final poll and the voting booth.[5]

Because the postconvention poll may still reflect temporary enthusiasms generated by the conventions, a third reading of the precampaign polls extracts this effect from the poll division. Although much of the effect of the political conventions on voter opinions is lasting, a portion dissipates rather quickly. Based on an empirical examination of preconvention polls and the vote, it is estimated that approximately a third of the net poll effects of the conventions, the convention bumps, are transitory.[6] To obtain a more accurate measure of true precampaign preferences, this transitory portion of the bumps was subtracted from each of the postconvention polls.

As an alternative to election-specific adjustments to precampaign polls, the probability of the campaign's decisiveness to the popular vote winner is estimated based on the uncertainty in the precampaign polls. The precampaign polls entail a certain amount of error and uncertainty that should be considered in their use as baselines for the campaign's impact. Again, the measure of uncertainty is estimated empirically. The variance of polls in between the second convention and Labor Day is used to determine the probability that the campaign changed the outcome from what voters said they would do prior to the start of the campaign. If the precampaign poll leader went on to win the election (apparently a case in which the campaign was not decisive), the probability that the campaign made the difference to the outcome is equal to the probability that the precampaign poll wrongly identified the candidate as being the electorate's precampaign favorite (a probability of less than 50%). If the precampaign poll leader ended up losing the election (apparently a case in which the campaign was decisive), the probability that the campaign made the difference is equal to the probability that the poll had correctly identified that candidate as the precampaign preferred candidate (a probability greater than 50%).

The third set of data is from the National Election Study (NES) surveys in presidential elections from 1948 to 1996. NES data for 2000 were not available at this writing. Based on the stability of their stated vote intention in the preelection interview and their reported vote choice in the postelection interview along with their reported time of their vote decision, reported voters were classified as early or late deciders. Early deciders were respondents who reported voting, whose reported vote choice matched their stated preelection vote intention, and who claimed that they reached their vote decision before or during the second party convention. Late deciders were respondents who reported voting and who claimed to have reached their vote decision after the conventions or whose reported vote choice differed from their declared vote intention in the preelection survey. Because the distribution of the reported vote in NES surveys differs from the known actual national vote distribution, the NES data have been reweighted to correct for this unrepresentativeness.[7] Effects of the campaign can be determined by comparing the vote division of

voters deciding their votes during the campaign (late deciders) to the votes of those who had decided how they would vote prior to the campaign (early deciders). If the decisions of late deciders overturn the decisions of early deciders, the campaign season would appear to have been decisive to the election outcome.

MEASURES OF CAMPAIGN EFFECTS

Table 1 presents the measure of campaign effects for the 14 elections from 1948 to 2000 using unadjusted and adjusted preconvention polls for the start point of the campaign. The data are oriented in terms of the in-party candidate. Although campaigns typically have produced net vote shifts between 3.5 and 4.4 percentage points of the vote, most precampaign poll leaders have survived to win the election. The typical campaign has held constant or narrowed but not eliminated the front-runner's lead. Depending on which precampaign poll measure is consulted, the front-runner's post-convention lead apparently held steady or declined (without reversing) in 10 to 12 of the 14 races. With the exception of Dewey's legendary loss in 1948, every presidential front-runner in the past 50 years who has held at least a 54 to 46 lead going into the campaign has emerged victorious. Apart from the very slight poll boosts in Eisenhower's 1952 and 1956 campaigns (except by the convention bump adjusted numbers), Reagan's 1984 campaign (a change of less than 2 percentage points in each instance), and possibly the poll boost for Reagan in 1980 (by the two adjusted measures), none of the front-runners significantly augmented their lead during these campaigns.

Whereas the typical campaign leaves the front-runner's lead undisturbed or erodes some portion of it, several campaigns have reversed what otherwise would have been the outcome and apparently made the difference in deciding the popular vote winner. As each poll measure in Table 1 indicates, the postconvention campaigns clearly reversed the public's verdict in two cases, the Truman-Dewey race of 1948 and the Kennedy-Nixon contest of 1960. In addition, there is a real possibility that the postconvention campaigns in the Reagan-Carter election of 1980 and the Bush-Gore race of 2000 were also decisive. In the later cases, the poll leaders held such narrow leads

TABLE 1

Change in Preferences for In-Party Presidential Candidates From Postconvention Polls, 1948-2000

Year	Party of the In-Party Candidate	Postconvention Poll Support for the In-Party Candidate			In-Party Candidate's Two-Party Vote	Change During Campaign			Probability That Campaign Decided Election Outcome	Campaign's Probable Effect on Front-runner
		Actual	Poll Error Adjusted	Bump Adjusted		Actual	Poll Error Adjusted	Bump Adjusted		
1948	Democratic	43.5	47.5	43.6	52.3	8.8	4.8	8.8	.92	reversal
1952	Democratic	46.2	45.1	42.1	44.6	–1.6	–0.5	2.4	.13	unclear
1956	Republican	55.9	54.6	58.1	57.8	1.9	3.2	–0.3	.09	unclear
1960	Republican	53.2	53.5	51.2	49.9	–3.3	–3.6	–1.2	.85	reversal
1964	Democratic	69.1	65.7	69.6	61.3	–7.8	–4.4	–8.2	.03	narrowing
1968	Democratic	41.9	42.6	44.3	49.6	7.7	7.0	5.3	.07	narrowing
1972	Republican	68.1	66.7	64.9	61.8	–6.3	–4.9	–3.1	.03	narrowing
1976	Republican	41.4	40.1	41.1	49.0	7.6	8.8	7.9	.07	narrowing
1980	Democratic	50.6	47.7	49.7	44.7	–5.9	–3.0	–5.0	.61	unclear
1984	Republican	57.9	57.7	57.8	59.2	1.3	1.4	1.4	.07	no change
1988	Republican	54.8	53.3	52.0	53.9	–0.9	0.6	1.9	.10	no change
1992	Republican	44.7	45.4	48.1	46.5	1.9	1.2	–1.5	.12	no change
1996	Democratic	61.8	59.1	62.0	54.7	–7.1	–4.3	–7.3	.05	narrowing
2000	Democratic	50.5	51.5	48.2	50.3	–0.3	–1.3	2.0	.40	unclear

(continued)

TABLE 1 Continued

Year	Party of the In-Party Candidate	Postconvention Poll Support for the In-Party Candidate: Actual	Poll Error Adjusted	Bump Adjusted	In-Party Candidate's Two-Party Vote	Change During Campaign: Actual	Poll Error Adjusted	Bump Adjusted	Probability That Campaign Decided Election Outcome	Campaign's Probable Effect on Front-runner
Mean of absolute percentage point change						4.4	3.5	4.0		
Summary										
Expanding lead						0	2	1		0
No change (or unclear)						6	5	6		7
Narrowing lead						5	5	6		5
Reversal of lead (decisive campaigns)						3	2	1		2

NOTE: Both the poll and actual vote percentages are of major party preferences. The "no change" designation includes elections in which the poll (actual or adjusted) and the vote differed by two percentage points or less. The "unclear" designation is for elections in which the actual poll change and the adjusted poll change are not in the same general category of change. See note 5 for a discussion of the procedure for correcting the polling errors and note 6 for corrections for the temporary portions of convention bumps. The probability that the campaign was decisive was estimated using the unadjusted postconvention polls and an average standard deviation within a year's postconvention polls of 1.6 percentage points. See note 8 for further details.

going into the campaign that they could hardly be said to be front-runners, and it is difficult to distinguish between initial polling errors misidentifying the true precampaign favorite from the minor campaign effects that may have tipped these elections away from the precampaign favorite.[8]

The 1948 election is the strongest case for a campaign making the ultimate difference. Harry Truman was running behind Thomas Dewey both before and after the conventions, although polls may have exaggerated Dewey's lead a bit. Truman gained between 5 and 9 points on Dewey in the 1948 campaign, enough to reverse the outcome expected by the precampaign polls, not to mention the outcome expected by the preelection polls and most pundits.

The historically close election of 1960 between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon also appears to have been decided by the postconvention campaign. Although Kennedy led in the preconvention polls that year, Nixon came out of the conventions with a narrow but discernable lead over Kennedy. Whether as the result of the famous first debate or something more nefarious, a campaign swing of about 1.2 to 3.6 percentage points toward Kennedy wiped out Nixon's postconvention lead, which provided Kennedy with his slim plurality.[9]

The evidence of the postconvention campaign being decisive is less clear in the 1980 and 2000 elections. In the 1980 race between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, Carter led eventual winner Reagan in the postconvention poll by the narrowest of margins. In mid-August of 1980, following the Democratic convention, the Gallup Poll indicated that Carter was favored by 39% (50.6% of two-party supporters), Reagan by 38%, and independent candidate John Anderson by 13% and 10% were undecided. Reagan and Carter were tied in the next poll. Given the virtual tie in the postconvention poll and the undercount of Reagan supporters in the final poll that year (pushing the Reagan poll error adjusted numbers ahead of Carter), it is unclear which candidate (if either) truly was favored by more voters heading into this campaign. According to both adjusted precampaign polls for that year, rather than Carter holding a slight precampaign lead over Reagan in 1980, Reagan may have held a slight lead over Carter, which he extended during the campaign. The narrowness of the precampaign margin in 1980, whether adjusted or unadjusted, leaves considerable uncertainty about whether that campaign was decisive. However,

although it may be a stretch to conclude that the postconvention campaign of 1980 changed the public's verdict, it may well have created a decision for a public who entered the campaign lacking a clear inclination.

The situation in 2000 was in several respects similar to 1980. The campaign lacked a clear front-runner. Bush led Gore prior to the conventions, but Gore surged after his convention into a very slight lead, and the poll lead changed hands throughout the fall.[10] As in 1980, although it is difficult to say that the campaign changed how voters would have decided prior to the campaign, it may have created a decision where none had existed. On the other hand, the one difference between 1980 and 2000 is that there was a clear verdict in 1980 emerging from the campaign, whereas the "toss up" result of 2000 may well have been no different from how things stood with voters at the campaign's outset.

In 10 of the 14 elections, the pre-post analyses indicate that the postconvention campaign quite probably did not determine the popular vote winner. These include the Eisenhower 1952 and 1956 victories, Johnson's 1964 landslide, Nixon's 1968 and 1972 wins, Carter's narrow 1976 election, Reagan's 1984 landslide, Bush's 1988 election, and Clinton's 1992 and 1996 elections. The postconvention campaigns in several of these elections made a significant difference to the vote but not enough or not in the direction to have changed what appeared to be the electorate's precampaign preference.

A second way of assessing whether campaigns were decisive is to examine the vote decisions of voters who had decided how they would vote before the campaign and those who decided during the campaign. Table 2 presents the major-candidate vote division among early-deciding and late-deciding voters in the elections from 1948 to 1996 (Campbell, 2000). The candidate favored by voters deciding prior to the campaign (before or at the time of the conventions) won 10 of these 13 elections. The preferred candidate of early deciders even prevailed over the opposing candidate favored by late deciders in 3 elections (1964, 1968, and 1972). In effect, campaign effects on late-deciding voters sustained the preferences of those who decided before the campaign in 7 elections and ran contrary to but failed to overturn the preference of early deciders in 3 elections.

TABLE 2

Vote Division by the Time of the Vote Decision, 1948-1996

Election	Vote Choice of Early Deciders (%)		Vote Choice of Late Deciders (%)		Party of the Winning Candidate	Winning Vote Percentage	Who Elected the Winning Candidate?
	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican			
1948	47.7	52.3	64.3	35.7	Democrat	52.3	Late deciders
1952	41.6	58.4	49.5	50.5	Republican	55.4	Both agreed
1956	41.9	58.1	43.2	56.8	Republican	57.8	Both agreed
1960	42.1	57.9	60.7	39.3	Democrat	50.1	Late deciders
1964	69.5	30.5	49.3	50.7	Democrat	61.3	Early deciders
1968	46.8	53.2	52.9	47.1	Republican	50.4	Early deciders
1972	29.1	70.9	50.0	50.0	Republican	61.8	Early deciders
1976	45.4	54.6	56.7	43.3	Democrat	51.1	Late deciders
1980	45.4	54.6	43.8	56.2	Republican	55.3	Both agreed
1984	38.0	62.0	46.1	53.9	Republican	59.2	Both agreed
1988	45.7	54.3	46.6	53.4	Republican	53.9	Both agreed
1992	51.5	48.5	56.1	43.9	Democrat	53.5	Both agreed
1996	55.1	44.9	54.0	46.0	Democrat	54.7	Both agreed

NOTE: The data are computed from the National Election Study (NES). The 2000 data were not yet available at this writing. The 1948 study, although not normally included in the NES series, had the vote intention, vote choice, and time-of-decision questions and so is reported. The data have been reweighted to reflect the actual vote distribution. Early deciders are those who claim to have voted, claimed to have decided at or before the national conventions, and did not change their reported vote choice from their previously stated vote intention. Late deciders are those who claim to have voted and said that they decided after the conventions or changed their vote choice from the previously stated vote intention.

The campaign, as reflected in the vote choices of late-deciding voters, made the difference in three elections. As in the pre-post analysis, the time of decision analysis indicates that the campaigns of 1948 and 1960 were probably decisive. In 1948, Dewey held a slim lead among the large group of early deciders that year. About 72% of all voters in 1948 decided at or before the conventions how they would vote. Although the portion of the electorate deciding during the campaign was relatively small, they divided almost two to one in favor of Truman. This was enough to reverse what seemed to be a certain Dewey victory in what is still one of the greatest campaign comebacks in American electoral history.

The 1960 situation was somewhat different, but late deciders again reversed the outcome. Richard Nixon held a strong lead over John Kennedy among those who had decided their votes before the campaign, although these early deciders constituted a smaller portion of the electorate (57%) than they had in 1948. Kennedy, however, captured more than 60% of the votes of late deciders, and this was enough to reverse the verdict of those who had decided how they would vote prior to the campaign.

Whereas the time of decision and pre-post analyses concur that the 1948 and 1960 campaigns were decisive, they differ about the impact of the Ford-Carter campaign of 1976 and, to some extent, the Reagan-Carter race of 1980. The analyses of the 1976 Gallup Polls indicate that Carter began the campaign with a commanding lead over Ford (that was sharply cut by the campaign), but the time of decision data paints a different picture. Early deciders, about half of all voters in 1976 according to the NES data, favored Ford. In contrast, late deciders, more than half of whom identified with the Democratic Party, favored Carter. This suggests that the usual reading of the precampaign poll numbers for Carter may have overestimated his competitive position. When pressed about their prospective vote choice in the trial-heat polling, many voters who were still unsettled in their vote choice indicated that they would vote for Carter, a decision that many would eventually reach during the campaign, but it took the campaign to convince them to stick by their party's standard bearer.

As to the 1980 Reagan-Carter contest, although the pre-post poll analyses offer an unclear picture of whether that campaign was decisive because of the uncertainty about which candidate (if either) was

the precampaign front-runner, the time-of-decision analysis suggests that the 1980 campaign may not have been decisive. Reagan led Carter among both early- and late-deciding voters. What is peculiar is that the trial-heat polls never suggested that the race was close, given Reagan's lead among early deciders. It may have been the case that a significant number of late-deciding Reagan voters were truly unsure at the campaign's outset of how they would vote and the campaign served to resolve their reservations about voting for Reagan.

THREE CATEGORIES OF CAMPAIGNS

Based on these four different measures of campaign effects during the past 50 years of elections, the 13 elections appear to fall into three categories: those in which campaigns most probably did not decide the election outcome, those in which the campaigns may have decided the outcome, and those in which campaigns probably were decisive.[11]

WHEN CAMPAIGNS PROBABLY WERE NOT DECISIVE

If the past 50 years of electoral history is typical, most presidential general election campaigns after the conventions do not determine which candidate wins the national popular vote.

The various measures of campaign effects found no evidence that postconvention campaigns made the difference in 9 of the 14 elections from 1948 to 2000. There was no evidence of these campaigns being decisive in the elections of 1952, 1956, 1964, 1968, 1972, 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996. Five of these elections involved the reelection of an incumbent president (1956, 1964, 1972, 1984, and 1996). The campaigns appear not to have been decisive in the reelection of Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton or in Johnson's 1964 election after succeeding Kennedy. With the exception of Clinton's 1996 reelection, of the incumbents who were reelected (and three were not: Ford, Carter, and Bush), incumbents who won reelection did so with landslide or near-landslide votes. In these cases, the election was effectively decided well before the campaign.

Beyond the five elections of successful incumbents, the campaigns of 1952, 1968, 1988, and 1992 also appear not to have been decisive.

Eisenhower's personal popularity as a war hero, the long duration of Democratic control of the White House, the dragging on of the Korean War, rising prices, and various scandals in Washington settled the 1952 election early. Eisenhower held a modest to strong lead in the polls throughout the election year and won majorities among both early-deciding and late-deciding voters.

The tumultuous campaign of 1968 made a difference to the vote but was not decisive to the outcome (White, 1969). The chaos of that election year was particularly divisive for the Democratic Party. The left wing of the party was disaffected by the treatment of the antiwar candidacies of Senator Eugene McCarthy and Senator Robert Kennedy. The right wing of the party was also disaffected by the party's endorsement of liberal civil rights policies and bolted to support the third- party candidacy of Alabama Governor George Wallace. As a result of the splintered Democratic Party, Republican candidate Richard Nixon led in the polls from July until election day and had a modest majority among early-deciding voters. However, as Democratic wounds healed, support for Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey built. The campaign narrowed Nixon's vote by better than 7 points, with Humphrey winning a majority of the votes of those reaching a decision during the campaign, but this was not enough to overcome Nixon's lead, and Nixon held on to win with a very narrow plurality.

The 1988 postconvention campaign also appears not to have mattered in the end. Despite complaints about negative campaigning by George Bush and the Republicans (the Willie Horton ads) and about an inept campaign run by Michael Dukakis and the Democrats, George Bush consistently led in the polls after the conventions and won vote majorities among both early-deciding and late-deciding voters. Although the period around the time of the conventions may have been crucial in 1988 (Dukakis led Bush by about 53% to 47% going into the conventions), Bush held a modest lead over Dukakis after the conventions, and on election day won by about the same margin.

The 1992 postconvention campaign also appears to not have been decisive. Despite the comings and goings of third-party candidate Ross Perot and his impressive vote totals in November, despite complaints about a disengaged Bush candidacy, and despite a modest Bush lead going into the conventions, Bill Clinton led George Bush in the postconvention polls to election day and won vote majorities among

both early-deciding and late-deciding voters. What is somewhat distinctive about the 1992 election is that the incumbent lost without the postconvention campaign making the difference. Whether desiring a change after 12 years of the Reagan-Bush administration or feeling betrayed by the incumbent's broken promise of "no new taxes," the electorate apparently decided upon the completion of the conventions that it would not extend President Bush a second term in office.

WHEN CAMPAIGNS MAY HAVE BEEN DECISIVE

There is some real possibility that campaigns may have made the difference in three presidential elections since 1948. Two of these possibilities involved Democrat Jimmy Carter. The presidential campaign of 1976 may have paved the way for Carter to defeat President Gerald Ford, and the presidential campaign of 1980 may have been critical to Carter's defeat by Ronald Reagan. In addition to these two cases, the postconvention campaign in the 2000 race between George W. Bush and Al Gore may have been decisive.

Although Carter, as we have already observed, had an apparently sizeable lead over Ford going into the 1976 campaign, Ford actually led Carter among early-deciding voters that year. This might indicate that much of the Carter support in the early preference poll was tentative. As a new face on the national political scene and having emerged from a crowded field of Democratic candidates to win the party's nomination, many Democrats may have been suspending judgment about Carter. The campaign allowed Carter to sound mainstream Democratic views and reinvigorate partisan divisions that had been clouded in the nomination contest. In fact, in 1976, more voters identifying with the Democratic Party decided during the campaign than decided before it (53% late compared with 47% early), and Carter received about three quarters of their votes.

The campaign of 1980 may also have been decisive. Although the NES data indicate that both early and late deciders favored Republican presidential challenger Ronald Reagan to incumbent President Jimmy Carter and the adjusted poll numbers indicate that Reagan had a small lead over Carter at the outset of the campaign, the unadjusted poll numbers had Carter out in front. One reasonable reading of these data is that there was no true front-runner at the outset of the 1980 cam-

paign, the election was up for grabs, and the campaign that year would be decisive one way or the other. Carter entered the campaign season as the incumbent of the majority party, two prodigious assets. On the other hand, the election-year economy under Carter had rarely been worse, and many saw the administration as weak and confused on both foreign and domestic policies. Although Reagan was a charismatic opponent, many voters feared his extremism and questioned his competence and thus hesitated to give him their support. Some even flirted with voting for the more moderate Republican congressman John Anderson's independent bid for the presidency. In the end, the campaign may have quelled concerns about Reagan and convinced voters that he was an acceptable alternative to Carter. Of course, Reagan may have been able to win the White House without convincing these voters, but there is some real possibility that he would not have won without them and that the campaign made the difference.

WHEN CAMPAIGNS PROBABLY WERE DECISIVE

The presidential campaigns of 1948 and 1960 probably decided the outcomes of those elections. Both the unadjusted and adjusted Gallup Poll data indicate that Dewey led Truman at the outset of the 1948 campaign and that Nixon had a slight lead over Kennedy at the outset of the 1960 campaign. Moreover, both in 1948 and in 1960, the verdict of the early-deciding voters, those who decided how they would vote before or at the time of the conventions, were overturned by the decisions of voters who made up their minds how they would vote during the campaign. Both Truman and Kennedy pulled together the New Deal Democratic coalitions in the last weeks of the campaign. Both received better than 60% of the votes of late-deciding voters.

The outcome of the 1948 election was one of the most surprising in history. It had become a foregone conclusion that Republican Thomas Dewey would defeat President Harry Truman. To this day, one of the most memorable campaign images is that of a triumphant Harry Truman, beaming from ear to ear, holding high an early edition copy of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that had erroneously proclaimed in its headlines "Dewey Defeats Truman." Less often recalled is that Dewey's victory was so widely taken for granted even late in the cam-

paign that *Who's Who* for 1949 had already gone to press listing Dewey's address as 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue (Donaldson, 2000).

Truman's situation in 1948 was much like Hubert Humphrey's 20 years later. Both were nominated by a bitterly divided Democratic Party. In Truman's case, both the right wings and left wings of the party bolted to run their own candidates in the general election. The bad news was that the nominee started the campaign in a weakened position. The good news was that there were many disgruntled partisans that might be lured back into the fold by the campaign, and the split from both sides made Truman appear more moderate (Donaldson, 2000; Lubell, 1955). With New Deal coalition bonds still relatively strong and by conducting quite a vigorous campaign (Holbrook, 2000), Truman was able to reassemble enough of the coalition to defeat Dewey. However, 20 years later, with the bonds 20 years more frayed and in the midst of the unrest regarding the ongoing Vietnam War, Humphrey fell short.

The second likely case of a campaign being decisive is the 1960 campaign. We may never know how the 1960 campaign was decisive, whether Kennedy's appeals through the debates or otherwise reestablished enough of the New Deal coalition to win or whether some sinister activity on the part of the Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's Cook County Democratic Party and others made the difference. Whatever the cause, the modest precampaign lead of then Vice President Richard Nixon eroded during the campaign, and Kennedy went on to win the election with the closest popular vote victory of the 20th century.[12]

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this analysis was to determine whether, how often, and when postconvention presidential general election campaigns have been decisive to their national popular vote outcomes. No analysis can determine with absolute certainty that a campaign made the difference, but this analysis provides the basis for drawing some conclusions. Given the consistency of the findings about 11 of the 14 elections since 1948 and the mixed results regarding the remaining 3, it would seem reasonable to conclude that 2 (probably 1948 and 1960)

and perhaps 1 to 3 other elections (1976, 1980, or 2000) were decided by their campaigns.[13] In short, it would appear that approximately 1 presidential election out of about every 4 has been decided by its campaign.[14]

There are several common threads running through the elections in which the fall campaigns may have been decisive and also several commonalities among elections in which campaigns probably did not alter the outcomes. In two of the elections in which the campaign may have made the difference, neither major party candidate had a significant lead as the campaign got under way. In 1960, Nixon led Kennedy at the outset, but not by much (53 to 47). In 1980 and in 2000, the polls were inconclusive as to who was the front-runner. A second trait of possible campaign-decided elections is that one party (often the majority party) was highly divided going into the campaign. The Democrats in 1948, 1960, and 1976 were especially divided and were able to reunite during the campaign. In 1948, the party divisions went so far as to create separate Progressive and Dixiecrat candidacies in the general election. Although far less divisive, the Democratic Party's nomination was also fiercely contested in 1960 and 1976. A tough nomination struggle may cause some voters to withhold judgment until the campaign; concerns about whether a candidate in 1980 (Reagan) was close enough to the political mainstream also gave voters pause.

One common condition that seems to ensure that an election will be virtually decided before the campaign is the presence of a popular incumbent. Eisenhower in 1956, Johnson in 1964, Nixon in 1972, Reagan in 1984, and Clinton in 1996 were popular incumbents, and none depended on the campaign for their election. It would seem that when voters are familiar with and fairly well satisfied with the performance of the incumbent, they might assume that there is nothing more to learn about either the incumbent or his opponent during the campaign. Of the four elections in which campaigns might have made the difference, one did not involve an incumbent (1960) and three involved incumbents who for one reason or another were in trouble. Truman's party in 1948 was divided three ways. Ford in 1976 was an unelected incumbent carrying the burden of Watergate and his pardon of Nixon. Finally, Carter in 1980 faced the electorate with one of the worst election year economies since Hoover's 1932 ill-fated bid for reelection during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Stepping back from the specifics of exactly when and under what conditions postconvention campaigns may have mattered to an election's outcome, how do the general findings of the frequency of decisive campaigns comport with general impressions about campaigns? From the standpoint of the conventional wisdom of political science, that presidential election campaigns generally have minimal effects, these findings do not directly contradict this view but may modify it a bit. General election campaigns do not typically elect presidents. There is no evidence that the fall campaigns made any difference to the popular vote outcome of 9 of the last 14 elections. The evidence is unclear that campaigns decided three other elections (1976, 1980, and 2000). Consistent evidence of decisive postconvention campaigns is found in only two election years (1948 and 1960), and even in these cases, there is some room for doubt.

From the standpoint of journalists and political consultants, perspectives that have tended to emphasize the importance and impact of campaigns, the findings also may not be entirely unwelcome. Although campaigns are not always decisive, they are not always inconsequential either. Postconvention campaigns have made the difference in some elections. The record indicates that they are or may have been decisive on enough occasions to warrant the attention they have received. To put it differently, between the campaign-fixated and the minimal-effects perspectives, these different outlooks on campaign effects may be merely the difference between seeing the glass as one-quarter full or three-quarters empty.

NOTES

1. Elsewhere, I have drawn a distinction between campaign effects that are systematic and those that are unsystematic (Campbell, 2000). Systematic campaign effects allow campaigns to be more predictable and thus allow the election results themselves to be forecast with some degree of accuracy. Unsystematic campaign effects are those that result from unforeseeable occurrences during the campaign that are not entirely processed by voters to reinforce precampaign inclinations. Although this distinction is important to understanding how campaigns matter, they are separate issues from whether and when campaign effects may have been decisive and thus are not part of this analysis. Also, some may question whether the change that occurs during the campaign might be due to some "equilibrium" process in which public opinion drifts toward an expected outcome. However, because it is unclear what this equilibrium process

might be other than the campaign and because real change is evident from the precampaign baseline for most campaigns, I regard whatever real opinion change that occurs as campaign induced.

2. Some events occurring during the campaign might have affected voters without being filtered through the campaign. However, these events (news about the economy or foreign affairs and so forth) are commonly interpreted in the campaign context. Moreover, whatever slight measurement error is produced by this temporal approach to defining the campaign is undoubtedly far smaller than the measurement errors produced by the alternative approach of attempting to enumerate all of the specific elements of the campaign. The later event approach usually proceeds with a list of events that constitutes but a small fraction of the campaigns' attempts to influence vote choices. Also, the passage of time alone, quite apart from the candidate and media campaign hype, may also affect voters, particularly those cooling off from disappointing nomination contests. This pure time effect is also counted as a campaign effect.

3. Although this study is restricted to examining the decisive net effects of the fall general election campaign on the national division of the popular vote, other questions regarding campaign effects are also important. These questions would concern nondecisive effects, the overall (as opposed to "net") effects of the campaign, the impact of various contributing elements (debates, televised messages, and so forth) in the campaign, the nomination campaigns, localized (as opposed to national) effects of the campaign, and effects on the ultimately decisive division of electoral votes.

4. In light of the 2000 election, it would be more accurate here to ask whether campaigns matter to the popular vote winner is the way that matters second most, because the popular vote winner need not be the electoral vote winner and the electoral vote winner is constitutionally the most important aspect of the election outcome.

5. The final Gallup Poll numbers from 1948 to 1996 are taken from Gallup's compendium of trial-heat polls. The data were obtained directly from the Gallup Organization. To facilitate comparison to polls done during the campaign, the unallocated rather than allocated final poll was examined. The allocated poll assigns undecided respondents to the candidates. The allocated poll was used for 1948 because Gallup did not report an unallocated number and the probability-based likely voter number (similar to that used during the campaign) was used in 1996 rather than the cutoff-based likely voter screen that Gallup used only for their final poll. In each case, the poll figures were computed to the in-party's share of support for the major party presidential candidates. The adjustment to a precampaign poll was based on two considerations: the error in the final preelection poll that year and an estimate of the real change in the vote that occurred between the time that the poll was conducted and election day. A regression of the last poll on the vote produced a coefficient for the poll of .80 with an adjusted R^2 of .87. Based on this relationship, the final poll errors used in making the adjustments to the earlier polls were proportionately reduced to 80% of what they had been. The poll corrections (added to the in-party precampaign poll percentages) are as follows: 3.984 for 1948, –1.110 for 1952, –1.300 for 1956, .348 for 1960, –3.401 for 1964, .656 for 1968, –1.402 for 1972, –1.270 for 1976, –2.892 for 1980, –.164 for 1984, –1.511 for 1988, .693 for 1992, –2.722 for 1996, and .986 for 2000. To illustrate the adjustment, in 1948, the final poll understated Truman's vote by nearly 5 percentage points. Assuming that 20% of this error was true voter change between the poll and the vote, the final polling error that year was about 4 percentage points. Assuming that this polling error was constant for that year, the precampaign polls should be adjusted by 4 percentage points in Truman's favor.

6. A regression using the preconvention poll, the second-quarter growth rate in the gross domestic product, and the net convention bump to account for variance in the in-party presidential vote for elections from 1948 to 2000 accounted for 84% of the variance (adjusted R^2) and produced a statistically significant ($p < .01$) coefficient of .345 for the convention bump. Also, an

analysis of correlations between the vote and various adjustments to the postconvention polls (adjusted by subtracting various percentages of the preceding bump) indicated that the correlation was highest between subtracting 30% to 40% of the prior convention bump. Although it would have been preferable to subtract a greater portion of the second convention bump because that had been more recent and presumably less of the temporary boost from that convention had dissipated, this was not possible because Gallup Polls prior to 1964 had not been conducted between the two conventions and thus the effects of the separate conventions could not be calculated for pre-1964 elections (Campbell, Cherry, & Wink, 1992).

7. The mean absolute difference between the National Election Study (NES) reported and the actual vote percentage is about 2.2 percentage points. Given that the average winning vote over this period was about 55.1%, a 5.1 percentage point margin over an even vote split, the survey errors are significant. Moreover, in several elections, particularly the 1964 and 1992 elections, the survey errors were considerable. The errors in the NES data, errors that are potentially quite problematic for comparisons across elections, can be corrected in the aggregate by weighting the data. The weights in each year for those who voted for different presidential candidates can be calculated by computing the ratio of the actual known vote for that candidate and the vote reported by the survey. If supporters of a candidate are underrepresented in the survey relative to their actual presence in the electorate, they are counted by a factor greater than one. Conversely, supporters of a candidate who are overrepresented in the survey relative to their share of the actual electorate are counted by a factor of less than one. The weighting procedure can be illustrated by the example of how the 1992 NES data were treated. The unadjusted 1992 NES data indicated that Bill Clinton received about 4.5 percentage points more of the vote than he actually received. It also erroneously undercounted votes for George Bush by about 3.5 percentage points. To correct for these inaccuracies, survey respondents indicating a Clinton vote were weighted by a factor of approximately .90 (43.01/47.53). In different terms, rather than counting each Clinton respondent as a whole vote, each was counted as nine tenths of a vote. Respondents indicating that they voted for George Bush were weighted by 1.10 (37.45/33.92). Rather than counting each reported Bush voter as one vote, to compensate for the underrepresentation of Bush voters in the survey, they were counted as one and one tenth of a voter. Through this weighting of the data, the survey data are brought into line with the known actual vote.

8. The probabilities of the campaign being decisive are based on estimates that the precampaign poll misidentified the front-runner. If the front-runner in the polls was not actually the precampaign favorite of voters, then his losing would not be evidence of the campaign reversing the public's precampaign verdict. The probability of the front-runner being misidentified by the polls is based on the estimated variance of the precampaign polls (between the final convention and Labor Day, the standard deviation was estimated as 1.6 percentage points). Some portion of this variance was undoubtedly the short-term component of the in-party's convention bump (Campbell, 2000). Because there is no hard vote to which the precampaign poll number can be compared, the analysis conservatively estimates the probability that the poll leader was in fact the precampaign candidate to beat. First, the variance in the polls over several weeks may include true change in public views rather than purely precampaign polling error. Second, the *t* ratios (the poll margin over 50% divided by the standard deviation of the poll) were interpreted conservatively with one degree of freedom.

9. For the classic account of the 1960 campaign, see Theodore White's *The Making of the President 1960* (1961). Seymour Hersh (1997) presents a more provocative report on this campaign. Hersh claims evidence goes beyond the long-suspected vote fraud of the Democratic Cook County machine directed at the time by Mayor Richard J. Daley. Although there is no direct evidence of a quid pro quo, Hersh's research, presented in a chapter he titled "The Stolen Election," indicates that Joe Kennedy, patriarch of the Kennedy family, secretly met with Mafia

boss Sam Giancana about a year before the election and that Mafia money and backing, including campaign contributions and work from the mob-controlled unions, helped Kennedy carry Illinois and win the election (Hersh, 1997).

10. Gore's narrow postconvention poll lead may not have been real but a product of fleeting enthusiasm from the conventions. Bush received about a 3-point bump from his convention, and Gore received about a 9-point bump from his (Campbell, 2001). By the estimates in note 6, roughly 2 of the net 6-point bump in Gore's direction reflected very short-term enthusiasm rather than a real shift toward Gore.

11. Beginning with the 1980 election, Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde (1982, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1998) have authored a series of books analyzing presidential elections using the NES surveys. In each of these studies, they offered an appraisal of whether the general election campaign mattered. In each of the five elections, they concluded that the campaign mattered to the vote, although sometimes only slightly, but only one of the five cases (1988) mattered to the outcome. Their summary judgment of each campaign is as follows. For the 1980 election, they concluded that "it appears that the campaign may well have affected voting choices" (Abramson et al., 1982, p. 38). For 1984, they found that "regarding the outcome and vote choices, the answers appear to be no and yes. That is, voter choices seem to have been affected, but not enough of them to put the outcome in doubt" (Abramson et al., 1986, p. 61). Their conclusion in 1988 was that "regarding the outcome and vote choices, there are plenty of indications that the campaign did matter" (Abramson et al., 1990, p. 52). For the 1992 election, they concluded that "regarding the outcome, there is no evidence that the general election campaign made a difference. . . . On the other hand, there is reason to believe that the campaign did have a significant impact on voters' choices (Abramson et al., 1994, p. 64). Finally, for the 1996 election, they found a weaker case for campaign effects:

> Regarding the outcome, there is no evidence that the general election campaign made a difference. . . . There is evidence that the choices of some voters were affected by the campaign. In general, however, the summary judgment would have to be that the campaign mattered relatively little, and we probably should not have expected it to. (Abramson et al., 1998, pp. 39-41)

The discrepancy between this study and Abramson et al.'s (1990) evaluation of the 1988 campaign is a matter of timing. Although the campaign from after the conventions to election day appears not to have made much of a difference, public opinion did move against Dukakis prior to this. Dukakis led Bush in the polls into early August, prior to the Republican Convention in mid-August.

12. Nixon's poll lead following the conventions was not just the measure of a single poll. Nixon had a poll lead over Kennedy from mid-July to early September.

13. The estimate of two and perhaps three campaigns being decisive is based on the premise that 1948 and 1960 were probably, but not certainly, decided by their campaigns and that 1976, 1980, and 2000 may have been decided by their campaigns. The chances of 1976, 1980, and 2000 all having been decided by their campaigns seems unlikely given the mixed evidence in the 1976 case, the uncertainty about the precampaign leaders in 1980 and 2000, and the uncertainty about the net extent and direction of the very small change that may have occurred between the 2000 conventions and election day.

14. The availability of the Gallup Poll data limits the direct analysis of these data to the 14 presidential election campaigns from 1948 to 2000. Although we could use the distribution of campaign effects to make estimates of the likelihood of campaigns having been decisive in

pre-1948 elections, there is the added uncertainty of which candidate in these election years was the front-runner going into the campaign. Nevertheless, we can make some appraisals. Given the distribution of campaign effects noted in Table 1, it is quite likely that campaigns decided several elections that were won by fewer than 3 percentage points (53 to 47 or closer). From 1868 to 2000, there were 13 such elections. These include the 1948 and 1960 elections that appear likely to have been campaign-decided contests, the 2000 and the 1976 elections that are considered possible campaign-decided elections, and the 1968 election that was evaluated as unlikely to have been decided by that year's campaign. The most likely prospects for pre-1948 campaign-decided elections are the controversial Hayes-Tilden race of 1876, the Garfield-Hancock race of 1880, the infamous "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion" election between Cleveland and Blaine in 1884, either or both of the Cleveland-Harrison elections of 1888 and 1892, and the "forgotten handshake" election between Wilson and Hughes in 1916. Each of these 6 elections was decided by a margin closer than 52% to 48%. As can be seen in Table 1, campaigns reduced the front-runner's lead by 3 percentage points or more in 8 of the 14 most recent elections. If typical, this suggests that campaigns may have been responsible for the outcome in several of these close pre-1948 elections. At the other end of the competitiveness spectrum, it is quite unlikely that campaigns decided any of the 11 landslide or near-landslide elections since 1868. Finally, it is unlikely, although possible, that campaigns may have decided an election won by moderate vote margins (more than 53% but less than 57% of the vote). Note that the 1980 election would be included in this group and was found to be a possible campaign-decided election, although the 1952, 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections also fall into this category and appear unlikely to have been decided by their campaigns.

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James E. Campbell is a professor of political science at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. His most recent book is The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote *(Texas A&M University Press). His previous books include* Cheap Seats: The Democratic Party's Advantage in U.S. House Elections *(Ohio State University Press),* The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections *(University Press of Kentucky), and the coedited* Before the Vote: Forecasting American National Elections *(Sage). He has also published numerous articles and book chapters on elections, campaigns, voting behavior, political parties, and other aspects of American politics.*