


For voters, the 2016 election campaign is a marathon with very limited choices.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/09/23/for-voters-the-2016-election-campaign-is-a-marathon-with-very-limited-choices/

9/23/2016

While there are now only six weeks remaining before the 2016 presidential election, the election campaign has been underway for more than 18 months for some candidates. [Thomas Leeper](#) writes that despite this long-lead time, voters do not seem particularly interested in the election, with many put off by its negativity. He argues that the day-to-day activities of campaigns (including gaffes) often do little to shift the needle towards one candidate or another; this campaign is little different, with Hillary Clinton having been the favored candidate to win since the beginning.



Election campaigns ostensibly serve to provide citizens with the chance to meet, learn about, and decide between candidates for public office. American presidential campaigns carry a particularly strong air of importance – the choice of commander-in-chief, leader of the free world, and so on – sets the stakes of these quadrennial events to ever greater heights. But amidst a campaign of astonishing negativity, spearheaded by two highly disliked major-party candidates, it is worth pausing to ask how and in what ways campaigns matter and whether they are worth it.

Presidential campaigns have become a marathon effort. Though perhaps hard to fathom now, Donald Trump announced his candidacy in June of last year; Hillary Clinton arguably announced her candidacy in January of 2007 when she last sought the office. Presidential campaigns demand not only the endurance of their combatants but also of the electorate that observes them and holds the ultimate reins of power. The consequence of regularly timed elections is an increasingly endless campaign begun shortly after the determination of the last election's winners and losers.

Yet the electorate hardly seems energized by this persistent politicking. In [a remarkably stable trend dating to the early 1950s](#), no more than half of Americans have described themselves as “very much interested” in national election campaigns, though there has been a slight increase in engagement since 2008. [Data gathered by the Pew Research Center in June](#) indicates 68 percent of registered voters have found the present campaign “too negative” and a similar number are bothered by the lack of focus on important policy debates. While many do find the election interesting, Americans seem to a large extent dissatisfied with the process by which the two parties compete for their votes.

This public dissatisfaction with the tone and content of campaigns corresponds with another important fact: by and large campaigns matter very little. To quote another political scientist, “[t]he hullabaloo of a presidential campaign so commands our attention that we ascribe to campaigns great power to sway the multitude [...] Yet other influences doubtless outweigh the campaign in the determination of the vote.” Political science research consistently shows that vote choices are largely “standing decisions” – a long-term commitment to a particular party, regardless of which candidate that party puts forward for a particular office. World events, economic performance, and war shape support for incumbent governments, but the day-to-day fluctuations of campaign activity (gaffes, mis-statements, and lies, debates, television advertising, policy proposals, and the like) shift vote intentions only marginally. Campaigns increasingly spend their resources identifying and mobilizing likely supporters rather than waste resources fruitlessly attempting to persuade committed supporters of their opponent candidate.

There are probably fewer words more apt to describe the 2016 election than “hullabaloo,” yet [those words were written in 1966](#) and they characterize the campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s. The more political scientists learn about campaigns and voter decision making, the more we learn that little has changed since then.

The 2016 election, despite the commotion and the characters involved, seems to follow the trend. Individual polls fluctuate according to sampling error, differential non-response among partisan groups, and short-term influences of particular events. Yet forecasts from FiveThirtyEight, *The New York Times*, HuffPost Pollster, and PredictWise all point to a story of stability over-time. Longitudinal studies of historical and more recent elections show this stability also holds true at the individual level, with few citizens changing their pre-campaign vote intention by the time November comes around. In this year's election race, Hillary Clinton has been the favored candidate since the beginning and the campaign appears to be doing little to change those standing decisions.

Is this a problem? Perhaps. Though the largely stable nature of citizens' partisan commitments suggests that the problems with contemporary campaigns are not either a dearth of information or an unwillingness to consider alternatives, but rather too much public discussion about too few viable alternatives. Presidential elections task citizens with a very simple choice between (except in rare cases) two alternatives, one of whom they are likely already committed to supporting. Elite polarization has meant that the opposing party's candidates are also likely much further away than they once were.

In this context, citizens do not need much information; they can quite easily, quickly, and competently decide whether to support their party's candidate or instead stay home. Campaigns thus tax the patience of large swathes of the electorate while election laws (in particular, first-past-the-post electoral rules and the allocation of electoral college votes) limit choices. American election campaigns are marathons, but with few alternatives to choose from and little long-term influence of much of anything during the campaign, the results are often predictable. Citizens would be right to ask whether the time, effort, and resources put into campaigns could be better spent.

Featured *image* credit: [WFIU Public Radio](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-NC-2.0](#))

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2cMCbJd>

About the author

Thomas J. Leeper – *LSE Government Department*

Thomas Leeper is an Assistant Professor in Political Behaviour in the Department of Government at the LSE. His research on individuals' public opinions primarily focuses on the role of information in politics. He is particularly interested in how mass attitudes reflect an interaction between the broader information environment – including the mass media and political elites – and individual-level attributes – namely citizens' expressed behaviors, psychological traits, prior knowledge and opinions, motivation, and affect. He tweets [@thosjleeper](#)



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP