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Modern Campaigning Origins

When was the first modern political campaign?

This is the question that Karl Rove, the chief political advisor to President George W. Bush, asked himself when he masterminded the campaign strategy that would help Bush become Texas governor (1994, 1998) and U.S. president (2000, 2004). As you will see below, one campaign in particular fascinated Rove and became a model for the modern campaign.

IN THE BEGINNING, CANDIDATES DID NOT CAMPAIGN

It's hard to imagine nowadays, but there was a time when it was considered poor form for a candidate to campaign openly for the presidency. They did not even attend their own nominating conventions. Historian Alan Brinkley explains how, in the nineteenth century, "The public aloofness of most presidential candidates gave an aura of nonpartisan dignity to the election process and kept alive the vision of the nation's founders of a political world free of parties and factions." Indeed,

As late as 1900, when William McKinley ran for reelection as president, it was possible for a candidate to remain almost entirely out of view during the national campaign and allow other party leaders to do virtually all the work of mobilizing voters. Successful presidential candidates in the nineteenth century accepted election almost as if it were a gift of the people -- a gift that they pretended never to have sought and that they had made no active efforts to accept (although of course they had almost always worked incessantly if quietly to obtain it).^[1]

The custom was so powerful that an orator the caliber of Abraham Lincoln adhered to it -- even in 1864, when the nation was at war, and even though the president was driven to serve a second term. As David Herbert Donald explains,

There was little that Lincoln could do openly to promote his renomination and reelection. Custom prohibited him from soliciting support, making public statements, or appearing to campaign for office. But as the nominating season approached, he made a point of hosting numerous social activities at the White House ... which could only boost the president's hopes for a second term.^[2]

This custom of imposed restraint affected much American political life. Indeed, one pretext for drawing up articles of impeachment against Andrew Johnson was that he "disgraced" Congress by openly, unabashedly campaigning; not for himself, mind you, which was considered beyond the pale even for him -- but for his *supporters*. After Congress slapped Johnson down, presidential aspirants dared not openly campaign for another three decades.

18TH- AND 19TH-CENTURY BEGINNINGS OF THE MODERN CAMPAIGN

Some students of history say that there is nothing new under the sun. Indeed, there are 18th- and 19th-century roots to that quadrennial civic ritual we call the modern presidential campaign, and it is important before proceeding to acknowledge them. In his study on the bitterly fought campaign of 1800 between presidential aspirants John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Aaron Burr, historian John Ferling wrote of the similarities he perceived between that election and present-day elections:

The prevailing sense for some time has been that politics in the eighteenth-century was substantially different from modern politics. Supposedly, public officials were different as well, tending to be more detached and disinterested, more above the fray. That was not what I found... Politicians then, as now, were driven by personal ambition. They represented interest groups. They used the same tactics as today, sometimes taking the high road, but often traveling the low road, which led them to ridicule and even smear their foes, to search for scandal in the behavior of their adversaries, and to play on raw emotions.^[3]

The 1800 contest had one element of modern-day campaigning in spades -- negative attacks. Federalist newspapers, siding with John Adams, waged a no-holds-barred assault on Republican Thomas Jefferson that makes modern journalism look like the model of civility and nonpartisanship. Federalist writers accused Jefferson of being an atheist, pro-slavery, a coward who avoided military service during the Revolutionary War, and a "romantic airhead" who would wrecklessly entangle the young U.S. with revolutionary France; later they circulated the story that he had had sex (and children) with his slave. For their part, Republican newspapers, which were pro Jefferson, accused Adams of being mentally unbalanced and a closet monarchist; they also circulated the rumor that he was having prostitutes shipped over from Britain. If you thought today's campaigns were bad, look no further than to the Founding Fathers; the campaign of 1800 was surely one of the nastiest in U.S. history.

Actually, the contest for president in 1828 was even nastier. Attack dogs for incumbent John Quincy Adams accused Andrew Jackson of being a dictator who was determined to subvert the presidency into a tyranny. Jackson, they claimed, was so ambitious for empire that he would become the American Napoleon. The Adams camp had plenty of ammunition to use against Old Hickory -- the brawls and duels, his execution of deserters in the War of 1812, his declaration of marshal law in New Orleans, his association with Aaron Burr, his invasions of Spanish Florida in 1814 and 1818. Meanest of all, they seized on Andrew's marriage to Rachel, who through no fault of her own was a bigamist when Jackson married her. Adams's attack dogs charged that neither Andrew nor Rachel Jackson was morally fit to inhabit the White House.

Political historians point to 1828 as a landmark in U.S. history for other reasons as well. Among them, he was the last veteran of the American Revolution to become president; yet he was the first president not considered a Founding Father; and -- to your point -- he was the first president to be popularly endorsed. Jackson did not rely on a small cadre of party leaders and "King Caucus," as the Founding Fathers had. Rather he got the nod from the Tennessee legislature as well as conventions and mass meetings around the nation. Presidential historian Paul Boller observes, "Voters in 1828 regarded the election that year as a momentous event.... A 'great revolution,' both sides agreed, had taken place; henceforth, there was to be more popular participation in American politics."^[4]

The 1828 campaign, by the way, was interesting for its political cartoons. Political cartoons have been around since politically-motivated newspapers. But when a cartoonist wanted to poke fun at Andrew Jackson's populism, he depicted Old Hickory as a jackass. Jackson turned the jackass image to his advantage -- he would stubbornly fight for the people --and the donkey stuck as a symbol of Jackson and the Democratic party.

Indeed, by 1832, the Democratic Party would hold its first national convention in a Baltimore saloon. (Perhaps the atmosphere of conventions has not changed much in the past 170 years!)

The 1840 campaign that catapulted William Henry Harrison to the White House also saw modern flourishes --slogans, songs, and the selling of the candidate. That landmark campaign season saw:

- One of the first catchy campaign slogans in U.S. history: "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too!" Whig supporters pasted the slogan (referring to General Harrison's victory over Indians at Tippecanoe, Indiana, and to the vice presidential nominee) on whiskey bottles, cigar tins, sewing boxes, and pennants.
- Image management: "handlers" took the aristocratic Harrison -- who was to the manor born, at Berkeley Plantation on the James River in Virginia -- and with the unwitting assistance of Democratic opponents transformed him into a log-cabin frontiersman in the Indiana wilderness.
- Songs: incorporated both political slogans and snappy music.
- Mass rallies: one of the most spectacular mass rallies in the early decades of the republic occurred when tens of thousands of Harrison's admirers descended on Tippecanoe Battlefield in the Indiana wilderness -- no small feat, considering the rough roads and limited water transport in those days. Another mass rally was held at Fort Meigs, where then-General Harrison fought during the War of 1812.
- Women campaigners: the irony of course is that woman couldn't vote, but they campaigned energetically for their Whig candidate, attending conventions, giving speeches, writing political pamphlets, and parading with brooms to "sweep" Democrats out of office. It got so intense that girls in Tennessee wore sashes demanding, "Whig husbands or none."^[5]
- Negative campaigning that sank to new lows: nineteenth-century politics tended to be a lot nastier than what we are treated to today. Harrison supporters went after the sitting president, Martin Van Buren, with a vengeance. Whigs nicknamed him "Martin Van Ruin."



Whig glee clubs went around singing, "Van, Van, is a used up man." And Whigs made hay out of the fact that Vice President Richard Johnson had had affairs with African-American women. And you think Bill Clinton had problems?

The **1852** campaign saw a presidential nominee enlist the talent of a national celebrity to help him win office. At Bowdoin College, Franklin Pierce had a famous classmate. His name was Nathaniel Hawthorne. Pierce called on the great novelist to write the campaign biography that would help him get elected.[\[6\]](#)

The **1880** campaign that put James A. Garfield in the White House also took some baby steps toward the full-fledged modern campaign. The Republican candidate had a famous publicist in Horatio Alger, who did not have to resort to fiction to tell Garfield's rags-to-riches story; Garfield, the last of our presidents born in a log cabin, was the "ideal self-made man." Although Garfield adhered to the tradition of presidents lying low during elections, he was one of the greatest orators in the Republican arsenal. It made no sense for him totally to conceal his talent under a bushel basket. So he waged the first "front porch" campaign from his home in Mentor, Ohio. It was a kind of canned press conference for any newsmen, lobbyists, and citizens who showed up to listen to him discourse on the issues of the day; during the fall of 1880, some 17,000 visitors dropped by to hear his stirring orations.

The **1896** campaign is considered pivotal by many students of American politics. When William McKinley decided to run for president, he enlisted a fellow Ohioan, Mark Hanna, to mastermind his campaign. It was a fortuitous choice: not only would McKinley win the election, but in the process Mark Hanna would create the mold for the modern presidential campaign.

In the first place, Hanna -- himself a successful industrialist -- recognized the importance of outspending the opponent, William Jennings Bryan, a populist Democrat who was criss-crossing the nation giving speeches that blasted East Coast elites. To overcome Bryan's energy and popular appeal, Hanna raised more money than any previous U.S. presidential campaign.

In the second place, Hanna, loaded with money, launched a massive ground campaign. He hired an army of 1,400 campaign workers who feverishly distributed buttons, leaflets, pamphlets, and posters.

Third, an army of speakers stumped for McKinley in strategic electoral areas. Hanna's strategy especially focused the candidate's message on two key cities, New York and Chicago, in states that were rich with electoral college votes.

Fourth, Hanna understood the importance not just of the ground campaign, but of ideas. Elections are about articulating, testing, proving, and vindicating ideas. One man in particular, Kansas newspaperman William Allen White, was in the vanguard of the campaign for ideas. He wrote a powerful editorial called "What's the Matter with Kansas?" in the *Emporia Gazette* on August 15, 1896 -- a conservative broadside against the Populists and their leader William Jennings Bryan. "The GOP reprinted a million copies of this editorial in pamphlet form, making sure that every middle class voter in the Midwest had a copy."[\[7\]](#)

The strategy worked. McKinley won, and Hannah's methods are studied to this day, as Karl Rove will attest. Mark Hanna is his guru.

It bears repeating: in the nineteenth-century, incumbent presidents did not go out on the stump on their own behalf. Even presidential candidates who were not incumbents rarely courted voters. Many of those who did -- Horace Greeley in **1872**, James Blaine in **1884**, and William Jennings Bryan in **1896** -- all lost.[\[8\]](#)

The first time an incumbent president tentatively spoke out on his own behalf was exactly one hundred years ago, when Theodore Roosevelt ran for re-election in **1904**. Tentative is not a word normally associated with TR. No stranger to energetic campaigning, he had stumped hard as a vice presidential candidate in 1900 on behalf of William McKinley's reelection. But in 1904 he had to cool his heels at Sagamore Hill -- an act of torture, given his ebullient personality. As he wrote to his son Kermit, on the eve of the election, "I have continually wished that I could be on the stump myself.... I have fretted at my inability to hit back, and to take the offensive ... against Parker."[\[9\]](#) Nevertheless, he speecified from his front porch and wrote some pieces defending his record.

TR's restrained behavior in 1904 would go by the wayside within a decade. By the time the **1912** campaign rolled around, both William Howard Taft and TR were competing in public for votes, perhaps because of the personal animosity that had developed between the two.

Even after TR and Taft broke the mold, Warren Harding resorted to the hallowed practice of a front porch campaign in **1920** in Marion, Ohio, and Herbert Hoover ventured out the give only seven campaign speeches when he ran for president in **1928**.

One important innovation came about in 1928 that would impact the **1932** race between Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Democrats, tired of being shut out of the White House during the Roaring Twenties, hired a full-time attack dog and put him in an office in Washington, D.C. Charles M had a background in journalism; his job was to churn out press releases and op-eds that would magnify every mistake Herbert Hoover made as president. The stock market crash of 1929, and spreading depression, made the task of tearing down the so-called Great Engineer all the more defensible. It helped tie up the Democrats to nominate a candidate, FDR, who would crush Hoover in the 1932 contest.

20TH-CENTURY CAMPAIGNS HARNESS NEW TECHNOLOGIES

But change was afoot. Take the impact of the transportation revolution on campaigns. As the era of the horse-and-buggy passed, energetic candidates harnessed trains, automobiles, and airplanes to set themselves on the road to the White House. One of the most dramatic campaign-transportation firsts occurred in 1932, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt flew from Albany, New York, to the convention in Chicago, Illinois, to accept his party's nomination for president. This act marked a break with tradition. Prior to 1932, most nominees stayed home during conventions and received a delegation called a "notification ceremony," informing them that they were the party's nominee for president. Of course, they already knew that fact, but the formal ceremony was part of American custom until 1932. After '32 it was dispensed with.

Changed was also ushered in by the development of electronic media. Edison's phonograph in the late 1800s, radio and motion-picture newsreels in the 1920s, television in the 1940s and '50s -- all revolutionized presidential campaigns. Think about it: all through the nineteenth century, candidates had relied on a print culture -- newspapers and broadsides, almanacs and political biographies -- to reach a mass audience; there was little difference in communication the message of Thomas Jefferson in 1800 and, say, Grover Cleveland in 1888. But with the invention of a host of new electronic media -- phonographic recordings, radio, motion-picture newsreels, TV -- suddenly the nation became a giant town hall without walls. Millions of American citizens could experience what no previous generation had: they could listen first-hand to candidates speak and express their views. Increasingly, emphasis would be on the way a candidate projected his personality, and on the quality of his voice and looks. Were candidates physically fit? Did they *sound* and *look* like presidential material?

There are several media milestones worth mentioning; each shaped the modern campaign. The 1924 election saw candidates use the new medium of radio to broadcast their message. Prior to '24, candidates had been using phonographs to disseminate their voice to a mass audience.

Another media milestone occurred in the 1936 election, when Franklin Roosevelt and challenger Alf Landon saw the heavy use of radio combined with a reliance on the new science of polling, which would increasingly utilize another spreading technology, the telephone.

Other media milestones occurred in 1952, when Dwight Eisenhower became the first presidential candidate to appear in a television campaign commercial. That same year saw Vice Presidential candidate Richard Nixon deliver his famous "Checker's speech" on live TV and give such a credible performance that a flood of supportive letters deluged the campaign and Nixon salvaged his candidacy. Also in 1952, the CBS television network broadcast that year's national conventions. As Walter Cronkite observed in his biography, *A Reporter's Life*, it was the first -- and for a long time the last -- time that TV cameras caught mostly unrehearsed political behavior at a major convention. After 1952, a new professional type -- the media handler -- would increasingly influence what presidential candidates would say and do under the klieg lights. Political campaigns became choreographed presentations, like a Madison Avenue advertisement or Hollywood production. One new technology that fed this development was A. C. Nielsen's audimeter and film cartridge, which registered what TV viewers were staying tuned in to.

In 1960 the debates between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy ushered in the era of live televised performances. "The four debates," notes the Smithsonian Institution, "established new standards and expectations for candidate preparation, performance, and appearance." There was no doubt about TV's impact on the election. "When asked at a press conference the day after the election whether his victory would have been possible without the help of television, Kennedy replied, 'I don't think so.'"^[10]

Campaign TV commercials have also become a staple of the modern campaign. The 1964 presidential contest saw a masterful if cynical attempt to manipulate the public when the Johnson campaign aired -- just once -- the infamous television commercial of the little girl picking daisy petals, which dissolved into a mushroom cloud.

The 1968 campaign saw the sophisticated packaging of a candidate reach new heights. For the team of media advisors who managed the Nixon campaign and masterfully manipulated the media in the process, see Joe McGinnis, *The Selling of the President*. Henceforth, a skeptical press corps would often filter campaign events for viewers.

Partly in reaction to the public's sense of over-reporting and biased editing, C-Span developed a format that brought the sound and images of campaigns straight to viewers, without intermediaries. Watching such programs as "Road to the White House," viewers were left free to take in the sights, sounds, and substance of a campaign, and to form their own judgments.

The development of the Internet in the 1990s brought yet new dimensions to modern campaigning, as people could form virtual communities around candidates, and campaigns could tap into vast new populations in order to fundraise and disseminate their message.

The transportation and media revolutions -- as well as the steady erosion of the custom of restraint --dramatically changed the way candidates campaign. Combined, these factors made campaigns increasingly fast-paced and dynamic. As a result, even the verbs we use to speak of campaigns has changed. In an earlier day, when candidates stayed home, they "stood" for election. By the mid 20th-century, they "ran" for election.^[11]

(Question from Megan S. of Allendale, Michigan)

[1] Alan Brinkley, Introduction, *Campaigns: A Century of Presidential Races* (London: DK, 2001), p. 7.

[2] David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 475.

[3] John Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. xviii.

[4] Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Campaigns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 42.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[6] Philip McFarland, *Hawthorne in Concord* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 157-58.

[7] William Allen White, "What's the Matter with Kansas," online at <http://www.h-net.org/~shgape/internet/kansas.html>.

[8] Boller, *Presidential Campaigns*, p. 197.

[9] Theodore Roosevelt, letter to Kermit Roosevelt, October 26, 1904; cited in "The Election of 1904," exhibit at the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site (Wilcox Mansion), Buffalo, New York.

[10] Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, "The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden," exhibit label in Communicating the Presidency.

[11] George Nash, phone interview by Gleaves Whitney, August 31, 2004.