

Making Politics Personal

Why do people vote? At the end of the day, only a small fraction of US population is elected and the millions that participated in the election have little to no influence on the actual policy that is determined. Yet, many people do vote and most candidates on all levels still make quite the effort to encourage them to do so through campaigning. For many voters, politics, becomes personal. In Nielson's *Ground Wars* and Westermeyer's *Local Tea Party Groups and the Vibrancy of the Movement*, we see two different approaches to making politics personal and matter to individuals. However, the approaches to spreading candidates' messages, as defined in Silverstein's *the 'message' in the (political) battle* are quite different. Using the definitions defined in Silverstein's article, we can analyze how effective each approach is at the spreading the brand of candidates and ultimately, making politics personal.

When people think of American democracy, they like to think of the classic Norman Rockwell photo of an ordinary working man voicing his opinion at what looks like a town hall of some sort. Voting should be honest, rational and based on facts. Yet, as Silverstein argues, irrationality, emotions and money play a massive role in American politics as can be seen through a candidate's message. Like a brand for a company, a candidate's message is a persona that their campaign tries to put out, even if it is quite contradictory to how the candidate actually behaves. As argued in *the 'message' in the (political) battle*, the victory of Barak Obama can even be linked to messaging. If the persona is not based on purely fact, how are people supposed to know of them? One way is through door-to-door campaigning and keeping up with a consistent message.

Nielson's *Ground Wars* describes ethnographic work that took place in New Jersey and Connecticut in two competitive congressional districts during the 2008 election. The author describes day-to-day interactions and logistics of on the ground campaigning. Hundreds of people are hired as part-time workers or volunteers to help spread the word of a particular candidate. The goal is to encourage people to go out and vote for that candidate and the idea is that by creating a human to human interaction, it makes politics more personal for people. While the overall organization is able to reach about 20% of the electorate, many of the individuals are left with unanswered phone calls and door bells and even some not entirely appropriate language in response to their attempts to engage people. The idea of using human interaction to spread a message makes logical sense. There is something special about talking to a person than seeing an ad on Facebook or a flyer on the bus. However, what is perhaps more debatable is the idea of having humans spout a robotic and consistent message.

During Nielson's ethnographic work, he becomes trained as an official canvasser as well as observes others being trained as well. One point that is made clear is that canvassers have an explicit script that they must stick too. Volunteers and part-time workers are essentially trained to memorize the script which is filled with information related to the candidate's views on different issues. With this script, many of the interactions described by Nielson come off as completely robotic. People start spewing off facts from the sheet when they are trying to convince people to vote for their candidate. The one interaction that does seem like it might have swayed someone who was not planning on voting was when a canvasser went off script. Allen, who volunteers for Jim Hines, engages with a young man after many others would have given

up. He pointedly asks questions about topics like the Iraq War and it seems manages to leave an impression.

Even with humans as a medium, having volunteers and campaign employees spout a list of pre-approved statements, does not appear to positively encourage people to vote. Several months later, after the 2008 election, during the rise of the Tea Party, a very different approach is taken. As shown, in Westermeyer's *Local Tea Party Groups and the Vibrancy of the Movement*, homegrown and organic political groups that became affiliated with the Tea Party became quite effective at recruiting people for their cause. Unlike, the massive, scripted and organized political movement that took place in the districts analyzed in Nielson's article, the political groups in Westermeyer's piece formed from a political and maybe even emotional connection.

For many Tea Party members, when reporter Rick Santelli had his outburst where he mentioned the words 'tea party,' they felt a sense of understanding. One person interviewed in Westermeyer's piece says that it just 'made sense.' Unlike, the 'forcing' of a message that is done by the canvassers, many members of the Tea Party decided to join on their own, not because someone explicitly advertised to them. Others had similar stories when they saw press coverage of the Tea Party as well. There was a feeling of commonality that made them want to join.

What really divides the making politics personal approach of the candidates in the Nielson piece vs the Westermeyer piece is that most Tea Party members join on their own accord. They became part of the Tea Party because it was something they believed in and as one member stated in Westermeyer's article, they 'didn't want to just be a bystander.' Politics became personal for them in a natural fashion. Tea Party members felt like they needed to do something. There was no such message coming from the teams Nielson worked with. The scripts that were being spouted were very far from personal and focused on the candidate, not the individual.

Of course, it should be noted that the growth of the Tea Party was not completely homegrown. The central powers with money still played a huge role, just in a different fashion. Unlike, the Democratic National Committee, who dictated the messages for the congressional candidates, powerful people used Fox News as the medium to spread the message and various other groups with rich benefactors like the Koch brothers provided money. People were still controlling the branding or messages, just in a more indirect way.

The power of this approach can be seen in how local tea parties formed. Westermeyer describes that several of the local groups he saw in the Piedmont region of North Carolina formed from just one or two people who liked the cause and wanted a local branch. No one mandated that a local organization exist. These local groups grew quite quickly and efficiently used platforms like Facebook to communicate with other ones as well.

An important part of culture is having common practices that tie everyone together. Local Tea Party groups not only effectively formed together, they also maintained common practices that made people feel connected. For example, Westermeyer describes how members of the BCTP dressed up in Revolutionary outfits, carried around pocket constitutions and recited songs that united them together. Everyone who joined the group had to recite the preamble of the constitution. All of these practices contributed the shared culture and message among the group.

At the end of the day, for groups to have any political significance, they have to cause some governmental change. The story of the Tea Party would be quite different if no concrete changes were made but that is not the case. Not only did the Tea Party help shift Congressional power to Republicans in 2010, they also made a large impact on the local level as well. For

example, local Tea Parties created a large protest against Agenda 21 which they believed would hurt their way of life even though it was not a major issue for the rest of America.

There is no doubt that the extremely consistent political messaging of the Nielson piece, to the local, organic gatherings of the Westermeyer article, are extremely different. While the ideas in the articles are not outdated, the current political atmosphere described in the articles, including the Silverstein piece is. Silverstein ends his article by saying that McCain ultimately lost because he used negative messaging at the end of his campaign. That being said, an argument can be made that the power of natural political participation that is either created by or inspired by messaging from political candidates heavily influenced both the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 congressional elections.

By many past campaign standards, Donald Trump's campaign should have resulted in complete disaster with a landslide victory by Hilary Clinton. He had clear links to corruption, sexual assault, affairs, etc. Yet, enough voters in the right states came out to support him. While many, remain surprised about Trump's victory, an explanation could lie in a core part of Westermeyer's piece.

Many of the interviewed Tea Party members said they joined because they felt a connection with the message coming from them. Whether it was through the reporter's outburst or protesting, a connection was made to their own internal message that prompted them to join. A similar argument could be made about Trump supporters. Other than denying affairs, corrupt policies and racist comments, 'cornerstones' of Trump's campaign included the idea that he was not from Washington and simplistic arguments related to the economy, foreign affairs, etc. Trump's message was quite clear. Even though it was based in little fact, he certainly had an (attempted) persona of being a Washington outsider who just wants to make America great again. In the same way that Rick Santelli's Tea Party message 'spoke' to people, Trump's message resounded with quite a few Americans (who might or might not have been reluctant to share that they felt that way). Enough Trump supporters felt compelled by his personal and campaigning that they went to the polls to vote for him.

Not only did Trump's outsider message speak to people, Hilary Clinton's message did not speak to anyone. Trump's campaign had slogans and themes that made 'ordinary' people feel like Trump spoke for them (even though he was certainly not a working-class person). Even in speeches that made no sense, Trump would use statements like 'we' to evoke a common association with the working class.

Clinton's approach was quite different. Her most memorable argument was that Trump was bad so people should vote for him. There were no slogans that drove her campaign or that could have been put on hats or bumper stickers. She had no specific brand and ultimately, voters did not feel a connection with her that many felt with Trump. For enough voters in the Midwest, Florida and Ohio, Trump's outsider perspective compelled them enough to go vote for him.

An analogy exists between the Clinton vs Trump campaign and the Nielson vs Westermeyer piece. Clinton's campaign seemed much more like the campaigning that was described in the Nielson article. The same lines were repeated about policy issues but there was nothing extremely personal about the message. Nothing felt natural or organic about Clinton's campaign. Trump's campaign was a bit different. He made jarring statements but they were personal statements that made politics relevant to everyday voters. Through his frequent use of Twitter, that consisted of improper grammar and not carefully crafted statements, his supporters felt that Trump was like them. He was not a Washington operative that did not know the problems of Americans. Trump was a man who they could retweet and who expressed his

feelings regardless of the effects. Using the outsider persona, he was able to effectively push enough people to vote for him in both the primary and the presidential election.

After Trump was elected, many grassroots protest groups started. In only two years, the world that elected Trump looked quite different than the world in November 2018. Two women's marches occurred and the era of 'Me Too' had begun. These movements, engaged thousands of people across America. Like the passion that brought the Tea Party together, social movements in response to Trump's election also brought thousands of people together as well. It was not people going door to door asking to join in on a march. People, of their own volition, made the choice to join these movements.

The effects of the post-Trump election world were certainly seen through many of the Congressional elections. Not only did Democrats gain control of the House, a record number of minorities and female candidates became representatives. Many long-time incumbents were not reelected. Similar to the rise of the Tea Party, young progressive Democrats, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, became the center of politics. A change had certainly come to American voters.

Politics became personal for thousands after Trump was elected. It became personal when Trump was running for president. And when the Tea Party started gaining fame, politics entered became a subject on the forefront of people's minds. All of these political trends have one key component that was not present in the campaigning done by Nielson. People, on their own, joined political movements because they felt a sense of connection. No one was pressuring them to join these movements or to vote the way they did. It seemed like the natural and rational thing to do. They felt like the man in Normal Rockwell's picture and found a way to voice or have someone who they thought would voice their concerns.

For politics to really be personal, there cannot be a central, repeated message. Candidates most certainly need a persona but along with that persona, there has to be some natural or organic component that incentivizes people to vote. Even if thousands of people went around spewing Hillary Clinton's talking points, it is not clear if that would have made a difference given how disconnected people felt. For politics to be personal, there has to be a certain amount of passion not only in the people who work for the campaign, but in their potential members as well. The interactions that people have with members of political organizations needs to not feel targeted. Like Allen's style of campaigning, it needs to appear as if there is no one person in charge even if there are people donating millions of dollars to news networks or campaigns and having massive influence on how operations are conducted.

Like most arguments, the argument of political passion that has factored into the past two elections does have its flaws. In addition to the Westermeyer, Nielson, and Silverstein articles not reflecting the current political climate in March 2019, they also do not engage in much discussion of social media. There is no doubt that social media sites have played a massive role in the past two elections as well as in Trump's presidency. Similarly, the 2016 election was famous for the spread of fake news. Whether fake news prompted more people to like Trump or dislike Clinton is also a prominent factor as well.

Several months after November 2018, both sides of the aisle have had some sort of organic passion that has led to governmental changes on the national level. The 2020 race is still far off and is quite crowded at the moment in terms of potential Democratic candidates. Regardless of who is chosen to be the Democratic nominee, they will probably adopt a message and campaigning strategy that is like the one that led to the rise of the Tea Party, not the one that Nielson participated in.

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