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RULES OF ELECTION CAMPAIGN: EXAMPLES FROM THE PRACTICE

Nicolae LUPAȘCU¹

Abstract

This paper aims to address the issue of campaign strategy as an essential introductory aspect of any election campaign. It is known that all campaigns contain the same specific ingredients: candidates, polls, strategies, messages, advertising, organizing, fundraising, etc. But, on the other hand, every campaign has its own dissimilarities, and the approach and campaign strategy must be defined and adapted to comply with existing elements. The conclusion to be drawn is that no one can determine the appropriate strategy for any political or military campaign, without knowing the players, the political context, problems, trends and resources. These factors make each campaign unique.

Keywords: campaign; voters; polls; election communication; counter candidate.

Introduction

The main objective of any electoral campaign is to gather as many votes as possible for a certain candidate. The defining aspects of a campaign, like the instruments used, are the same but the angle of approach is different. Any subjective modifications are those related to the profile of the candidate, campaign team and targeted public. All campaigns contain the same specific ingredients: candidates, polls, strategies, messages, advertising, organizing, fundraising, etc. On the other hand, every campaign has its own dissimilarities, and the approach and campaign strategy must be defined and adapted to comply with existing elements. According to the Great Dictionary of Neologisms, strategy (<fr. *stratégie*) represents “the art of using all available means to ensure success in battle or in an activity” (Marcu, 2008). When we talk about strategy we say that “it is the only thing really important in a political campaign” (Faucheux, 2003: 68). A good strategy can save a mediocre campaign but a campaign, even a brilliant one, cannot succeed with a bad strategy. The idea is that strategy is created for the campaign and not vice versa; if it is to succeed, a campaign will never be adapted to a strategy. A campaign strategy, the crucial element for the success of an

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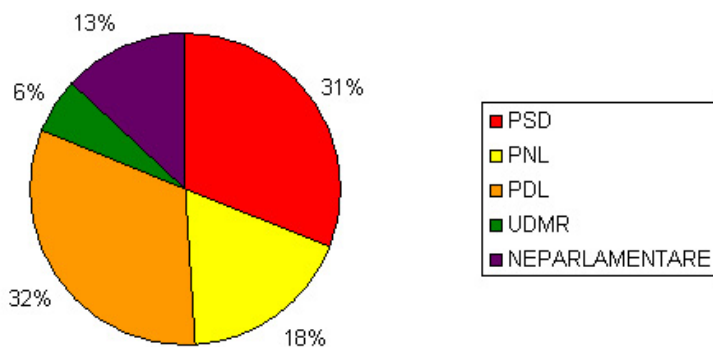
election campaign, has a subjective approach. We could say it is original as a work of an author written for both the political actor / actors and for the audience - voters concerned. Unfortunately, there is no recipe for a perfect strategy. A very high degree of subjectivity is involved in campaigns, the public agenda being the landmark according to which one must adapt any strategy. Dick Morris, in „The New Prince” said that “strategy is more important than speculation and manipulation” and that “short-term advantage accrued from daily news speculation is like checkers, while the advantage obtained in battle, following a strategy, is like the game of chess” (Morris, 2003: 37).

Rules of election campaign

Media is interested in the political game and focuses on speculation and manipulation because it follows the phenomenon in its evolution. Voters interested in the problems and the political programs of the candidates, aware of the importance of the vote they will give, will not be caught in the shallow manipulation of those who “fish in the muddy waters of press speculation”. For a successful campaign, the overall strategy, established with a clear structure of messages, is vital. It is said that it takes several months to think / establish a strategy and only a few lines to write it. If you cannot write it on paper, then you don’t have a strategy. Joseph Napolitan, one of the founders of political consulting industry and also one of the long practitioners of the election campaigns’ art, suggests several ways in the selection and application of a strategy, known as “Napolitan rules” (Faucheux, 2003: 26). I will explain below some of these rules:

1. *There is no greater effect* during election process than the “bandwagon effect”, meaning that “people like to be on the winner’s side and that they will vote for the one that is likely to win elections”. For this reason, “arranged” surveys are thrown out on the market so the candidate to appear as the most popular with the electorate and, consequently, to increase their intention to vote for him. On the other hand, it is possible that the reverse may be true for the following reason: supporters of the leading candidate tend to become too confident and moderate their pace, while those of the second candidate are motivated to work hard and more time to win votes. An example of the “bandwagon effect” was the numerous “poisoned” surveys on the media market during the period before the 2008 parliamentary elections. From a political point of view, the situation in late 2008 appeared bleak for the liberal cabinet led by C.P. Tariceanu. Given that the Cabinet support was based on an alliance minority (PNL, UDMR and minorities with less than 20% in Parliament), PSD conditioned the votes for certain law packages with some very severe requirements, often contrary to liberal principles. As political party, PNL wasn’t high ranked in the pre-election polls that abounded in that period, most of them controlled by the opposition (including PDL). These polls tried to induce in the minds of voters the growing trends of PDL and PSD for parties and Traian Basescu for Presidency. In the survey conducted between 25 August to 5 September by the Association for Transparency and Freedom of Expression (ATLE), with a margin of error of Â/-

3%, and published on Hotnews news agency on September 10, 2008 (Pora, 2008, Hotnews), the option of respondents for political parties presented the following hierarchy: PSD was ranked first with 33.1% intention to vote (for the first time in many months), second was PDL with 30.2% and PNL ranked third with only 16% of voting intentions. The next published poll, conducted in late September by INSOMAR, that did not provide too much technical detail about how it was conducted, gave some unbelievable percentages: PDL-39%, PSD-25% and PNL-15%. These data, difficult to verify, had the purpose to influence public opinion in a trend favorable to opposition, especially PDL, and induce the idea that the ruling party (PNL) was on a downward spiral. However, surveys closer to elections and published in late October (Evenimentul Zilei, 2008, October, 29), realized by CURS on October 29, followed in a short time by IMAS, would provide other data, much closer to reality, according to the graph below: PDL-32%, 31%- PSD, PNL-18%:



2. *The surveys are essential, but don't be fooled by them* says Joseph Napolitan. He recommends political polls to be used just to obtain information, as a working tool in the design and conduct of the campaign in order to win elections and not to see who comes first. *Surveys are not infallible, especially in the first part of the campaign.* Certainly, a campaign should not be conducted without adequate surveys but one must never act in complete dependence on them, no matter how professional they are.

3. *Timing is a delicate issue, based more on instinct.* If someone initiates a conflict too early or too late, its impact may become zero. There are predictable situations in which the opponent may make mistakes a few times and then fight back, but there are situations in which the response must come immediately in order not to waste the opportunity.

4. *Do not change the team during campaign.* If this happens, everything must be rethought according to the new team, which means an unnecessary loss of time, labor and money. During a campaign none of these resources is sufficient.

5. *If something works, then keep it working until ceases to be effective.* Something new is not necessarily better, so if it doesn't break then don't fix it.

6. *If you made a mistake admit it and try something else* or, in other words, if something is damaged, repair or replace it. The success of a campaign may depend on the capacity to adapt on the spot to the unknown. Everyone makes mistakes, the smart ones correct them.

7. *In communicating the campaign's messages you have to make sure they are clear and understandable.* Whether the message is created for a specific audience or is intended to apply to all voters, it must be clear and understandable for everyone. A good correlation between the electoral character and the *slogan (message)* is an important issue in building credibility. It is important to note that electoral character cannot be fundamentally different from the political character, but must be simpler and more schematic. A fracture between the known image and the electoral image of a candidate is devastating, both for him and the campaign itself. In other words, the image of a man who wants to be mayor of Bucharest, cannot be changed during the campaign, but can be simplified and, through simplification, improved. As a good example, consider Basescu's campaign in 2000 that reduced the political character to *authority, efficiency and determination*. These three concepts were the main features of the electoral character Traian Basescu, who ran for City Hall with the clear intention to make order.

8. *Never underestimate the intelligence of voters, nor overestimate their level of knowledge.* The electorate is not stupid but, often it may not have sufficient information to make the right choice. It is the role of campaign team to bring the information to voters and to package it properly.

9. *Negative attacks against counter-candidate in paid media are part of political life* (without relating to morality or immorality). These attacks should be left as far as possible for third parties, it can be either another candidate or public discussion moderator, or anyone else, i.e. if it cannot be avoided at least it shouldn't be initiated by our candidate.

10. *If there is no need for a negative campaign, don't do it; but if you must, then hit decisively.* A negative campaign is done or not. There is no middle ground when you start this way. Of course, this type of campaign is not desirable and those who respect themselves avoid it as much as possible. The reason why this type of campaign is so often used in our times is easy to understand: it is easier to get votes against than for a candidate. Although the context may determine a negative campaign, it must be done properly: strike a decisive blow, not only touch the opponent. Joe Napolitan says: "don't just break his fingers but hit him hard in the head. I prefer not to use negative campaign if I don't have to, but I prefer to win with a negative campaign than lose the elections without it" (Faucheux, 2003: 28). He believes that you should not avoid uttering your opponents name and the attacks must be clearly and explicitly targeted for voters to know who you refer to. So, no hints during the negative campaign! Attacks should be limited to individual performance, not his habits or in not any case his family. This principle was applied with great success by Daniel Oajdea, the PDL candidate

during the Campaign for College 9 Deputies, in the 2008 parliamentary elections. His attacks would surpass all expectations. If at first the impression was that he wanted a fair election race, based on peaceful confrontation of ideas and programs, with visits to districts and discussions with people about their needs, this tactic was abandoned suddenly for a different register, that of direct confrontation, in a classic, local negative campaign. Already criticized in the local press by leaders of PD-L, like MEP Mihaela Popa and Senator Dan Carlan, Oajdea's dirty campaign began with poisonous flyers, continued with the publication in an obscure and obscene pamphlet, of lies about Professor Doru Tompea and culminated in a very violent attack against some teenagers that were informing citizens, peacefully, on the political offer of the PSD + PC candidate. As I said, Daniel Oajdea exceeded the limits of a negative campaign, moving to the attacks on the opponent and his family, but also physical attack on his campaign team. Unfortunately, the results have proven the efficiency of this type of campaign.

11. *Do not start a negative campaign before you made sure that your own candidate enjoys a high degree of credibility.* Within the Romanian political context, Corneliu Vadim Tudor represents a perfect counterexample. From his debut in politics, in the early '90, he preferred to attack everyone, almost without any discernment and without the slightest concern towards his own credibility. Given the fact that he violated every rule in the book, one can hardly speak of a type of negative campaign in his case. In order to hit his opponent, Vadim Tudor not only uses the direct personal attack, but he also attacks the family and everything surrounding his opponent. Nonetheless, within the same campaign, when his own personal interest asks it, he will not hesitate to praise the same opponent and to declare him his lifelong friend (see the dispute between C. V. Tudor and Gigi Becali).

12. *Do not mistake education for intelligence.* Concerning this aspect, Romanian politics is able to deliver a bundle of popular characters that did not invest a great deal in their own education, but which were nonetheless able to benefit from wide public support, due to good campaigns and their political instincts. From Nicolae Ceausescu, an individual with only a few years of school, to Marian Vanghelie, Daniel Oajdea and finally to Traian Basescu, the history of successful characters with poor education pertaining to the Romanian political scenery is never-ending. Furthermore, I would even dare to affirm that in our times, a high degree of education could constitute a handicap when one runs for a public office. Culture inhibits, requires limits and demands common sense.

13. *Do not underestimate the influence of radio.* Even though the television is the most suitable medium to transmit and capture attention and has the greatest power of persuasion, one should not forget that radio occupies the second place, a fact that should not be ignored. The advantages speak for themselves: the costs of production are lower, the production itself is faster, the public targeting is precise and the broadcasting costs are way cheaper than those involved in television. On the other hand, the concepts and messages used in a spot ad campaign must be in line with the different types of media.

14. *Reality is in the eye of the beholder.* One can notice this fact easily without even having to be involved in a political campaign. A candidate that enjoys the public image of an honest man cannot be presented as a corrupt one, even if he were to steal the gold reserve of the central bank - e.g. Ion Iliescu: *poor and honest* -, and conversely, it is almost impossible to change the bad public image of a candidate into that of an incorruptible person. As an illustration of this latter rule, one should bear in mind the case of Adrian Nastase: as far as the story goes, he allegedly embezzled 1 billion dollars, a sum of money which he invested in China before the 2004 elections. One should also not forget the false inheritance from Auntie Tamara. In the meantime, 6 years have passed and none of the accusations from the political campaign were proven to be right.

Furthermore, even though he was a member of the opposition from 2004 up until now, the public opinion concerning him didn't change one bit: the electorate continues to deny him confidence and sympathy. In this particular case we are confronted with an intelligent strategy of denigration, one that was used to inflate the negative features of a given person, to fix his image within the public conscience as one of arrogance and corruptness and which in the end amounted to the exclusion of Nastase from the presidential elections, probably forever. Recently, his conviction in a trial which had to do with embezzlements for his own political campaign did not rouse public sympathy, even though he is a member of the opposition. An example which is more illuminating than the one indicated above is the fact that nowadays the entire political class is seen through the lenses of corruption, a situation that allows the *a priori* accusation of even those that enjoyed a good public image, as that of Ion Iliescu (*poor and honest*). One can easily become convinced of this state of affairs, if one pays attention to the slogans from the January protests, slogans that do not convey anything else but the dissatisfaction with the entire political class. Those who wanted to convey this image undoubtedly knew what they were doing: if everything is covered in mud, nothing will stand out, be it honest or corrupt. Everything *enjoys* a color similar to dirty gray. The image of press and priests were distorted in a similar manner. The inability to distinguish between good and bad puts everyone in the bench of the accused.

15. *Keep it simple!* A successful campaign requires only three simple steps: Decide what you have to say, how you are going to say it and say it.

16. *Protect the captive electorate.* Before starting to attract the undecided electorate or the one already taken by the opponent, one should be sure of the votes coming from the captive/faithful electorate, in order to have a constant base of votes. This type of electorate should not be neglected, for otherwise you risk losing it along the way.

17. *Do not hesitate to attack your opponent's electorate.* After you became sure of your own electorate, you can go for the undecided one or the one belonging to your opponent.

18. *Avoid self-destruction* or, differently put, don't score an auto goal. This advice may seem futile but a "famous" case from the 2009 presidential campaign could convince us of its importance: Mircea Geoana, the candidate credited with

the first chance in the presidential campaign, lost the elections in a televised confrontation with Traian Basescu. This occurred due to the fact that a night before the long-awaited confrontation, Geoana visited the controversial businessman Sorin Ovidiu Vantu. On the night of the confrontation, when Basescu mysteriously disclosed this encounter, suggesting thus a conspiracy against the people, Geoana, even though he had prior knowledge of the forthcoming attack, wasn't able to deliver a plausible answer, estranging thus the right wing electorate. This was a big mistake, for if Geoana would have avoided it, he would have won the elections. He should have not visited Vantu or he should have prepared an intelligent reply for Basescu's attack or, simply, he should have not attended the confrontation.

19. *Do not clear up the path for your opponent.* If you are being attacked, do not turn the other cheek. Every accusation must be disputed and the blows counteracted. A dignified attitude which doesn't allow itself to answer to abject and low accusations is harmful in a political campaign. The candidate should not counteract every single accusation, but the campaign must be ready to answer all these accusations. This situation is best illustrated by Vasile Spiridon Danale's candidacy for Mayor of Iasi in 2000. The candidate had a non-combative attitude, orientated towards actual projects, in accordance with the party doctrine, but which in the end brought about his failure.

20. *The support of popular figures is important when exploited wisely.* When being confronted with low acceptance among a specific part of the electorate, the candidate should try to gain the support of some figures that exhibit a high level of influence on that electorate. An eloquent example of an inadequate message and of incongruence between the candidate and the supporting figure is that of the ninth Electoral College, already mentioned above. Ovidiu Lipan Tandarica, the famous artist and drummer, launched on a stage in the Alexandru cel Bun district the following slogan: *Doru Tompea - a man you can rely on*. This slogan became the USP (unique selling proposition) of the entire campaign. Unfortunately for Doru Tompea, there was a big gap between him being Professor and Rector of a University from Iasi and this type of shows.

21. *Do not overstate your promises, especially if you expect to win.* Every unfulfilled promise made along the campaign will decrease the chances of being elected once again. Even though the electorate forgets or will not bother to supervise the fulfillment of each and every promise, the opponent and the hostile press will not lose any chance to attack. Therefore, one should not expose any weak spots for the next campaign.

22. *The apparent insignificant details are often important.* If during a campaign the theme of an overestimated budget for a certain ministry is taken up, one should not expect to arouse the interest of the electorate. The discourse should be adapted to the level of the audience. For example, if one wants to inform the audience about the amount of waste money, one should use as illustration the prices for the different things present in a household, because these are normally known by everyone. 7% from GDP conveys little to nothing to the average electorate. On the other hand, one can expect a great impact, if one will point out

to the fact that the secretary of a certain ministry has a salary that amounts to 15000 Lei or the price used to acquire bread for a military canteen is 20 lei. Therefore, *the detail beats the abstract* in an electoral battle.

23. *Acknowledgement of one's limits.* The biggest mistake for an electoral specialist is to believe that he knows everything and that he is able to do everything. The most successful experts in political campaigns are those that are able to bring on board the best professionals that money can buy.

24. *Dominate the dominant medium.* The dominant channel of communication can vary according to the type of campaign conducted, to the targeted public and to the employed message. In order to achieve an efficient communication, this medium must be invaded, dominated, no matter its type.

25. *The campaign should be entertaining.* No one will doubt the fact that a political campaign is a very serious affair, exposed to pressure and tensions. As long as the contemporary American vision about life teaches us that one should *have fun* no matter what, then why a campaign should be seen as an exception in this respect? And because *the American way of life* became popular in this part of the world and because the American way of conducting a campaign is nowadays undisputed, I could illustrate this *must be* pertaining to the electoral process by invoking Traian Basescu's campaign from 2004. We can all remember the slogan: *Adrian, you have no idea how insignificant you are becoming* or the Internet campaign for the Bucharest city hall elections from 2004: *Win with the hot pepper!*

26. *Election day is like market day.* When you sell cars or clothes or different other products, you have virtually unlimited periods of transaction, exactly because there are shops. When the product is the candidate, then the electorate has only one day at disposal to buy him. Missing it will cost you the elections. The next chance will come after four or five years. This situation has a huge influence on the *scheduling, synchronization and targeting* within a political campaign. No one can determine the suitable strategy for a political or military campaign, without having an accurate knowledge of the players, political context, problems, trends and the available resources. These factors make each campaign unique. The timing can be the most important aspect to make up the strategy of a campaign. The configuration of the timetable regarding the different actions that need to be undertaken within a campaign is one of the most important decisions that one has to take. Most campaigns commence with a captive electorate (especially when we are dealing with popular candidates or when we are faced with a presidential campaign). You must then identify the undecided or the ones willing to change their vote and then you must persuade them in order to enlarge the team. On Election Day, all voters - the ones in favor of your candidate and also those convinced along the way - must be called up to vote. This approach is suitable for all types of campaigns, because generally you find yourself in one of the following situations: either you have a large mass of voters that are willing to vote for you or you are going to attract them or, finally, those who intend to vote you are by far insufficient. Once you succeeded in attracting them, on Election Day you'll have to call them up to vote. As a conclusion, almost all successful campaigns used their resources for persuasion as well as for mobilization. The

decision that determines the amount of resources for each activity depends on a fine tuning between certain elements, relying on the available resources and on the evaluation of the political context.

Conclusion

No one can determine the suitable strategy for a political or military campaign, without having an accurate knowledge of the players, political context, problems, trends and the available resources. These factors make each campaign unique. The timing can be the most important aspect to make up the strategy of a campaign. The configuration of the timetable regarding the different actions that need to be undertaken within a campaign is one of the most important decisions that one has to take. Most campaigns commence with a captive electorate (especially when we are dealing with popular candidates or when we are faced with a presidential campaign). You must then identify the undecided or the ones willing to change their vote and then you must persuade them in order to enlarge the team. On Election Day, all voters - the ones in favor of your candidate and also those convinced along the way - must be called up to vote. This approach is suitable for all types of campaigns, because generally you find yourself in one of the following situations: either you have a large mass of voters that are willing to vote for you or you are going to attract them or, finally, those who intend to vote you are by far insufficient. Once you succeeded in attracting them, on Election Day you'll have to call them up to vote. As a general conclusion, almost all successful campaigns used their resources for persuasion as well as for mobilization. The decision that determines the amount of resources for each activity depends on a fine tuning between certain elements, relying on the available resources and on the evaluation of the political context.

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